

JAMES D. PRESCOTT

EXTINCTION COUNTDOWN

ANCIENT ORIGINS SERIES BOOK 2

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Chapter 8
- Chapter 9
- Chapter 10
- Chapter 11
- Chapter 12
- Chapter 13
- Chapter 14
- Chapter 15
- Chapter 16
- Chapter 17
- Chapter 18
- Chapter 19
- Chapter 20
- Chapter 21
- Chapter 22
- Chapter 23
- Chapter 24
- Chapter 25
- Chapter 26
- Chapter 27
- Chapter 28
- Chapter 29
- Chapter 30
- Chapter 31
- Chapter 32
- Chapter 33
- Chapter 34
- Chapter 35
- Chapter 36
- Chapter 37
- Chapter 38
- Chapter 39

[Chapter 40](#)
[Chapter 41](#)
[Chapter 42](#)
[Chapter 43](#)
[Chapter 44](#)
[Chapter 45](#)
[Chapter 46](#)
[Chapter 47](#)
[Chapter 48](#)
[Chapter 49](#)
[Chapter 50](#)
[Chapter 51](#)
[Chapter 52](#)
[Chapter 53](#)

[Real life versus fiction](#)

[Quick Reference](#)

Books by James D. Prescott

The Genesis Conspiracy

Extinction Code (Ancient Origins Book 1)

Extinction Countdown (Ancient Origins Book 2)

Coming this Fall!

Extinction Crisis (Ancient Origins Book 3)

Dedication

Once again, a special thank you goes out to Dr. Ricki Lewis ([DNA Science blog](#)) for enlightening me with her vast and impressive knowledge of biophotonics. To Lisa Weinberg, Rob Williams and the rest of the beta team for all of your terrific feedback. And finally to you, dear reader, for stopping by and for taking a chance.

Note to Readers:

As you may have already noticed in the table of contents, I've included some reference material on Salzburg along with a description of what each of the genes do and a short glossary of important terms. Feel free to flip back and forth as you make your way through the story.

Book Description

Dr. Jack Greer's startling discovery beneath the Gulf of Mexico proved to the world we were not alone in the universe. But when images from the Voyager One space probe reveal an alien doomsday ship hurtling toward the earth, the human race seems marked for extinction.

As news of the approaching ship spreads panic around the globe, signs of a sinister plot begin to emerge—one that threatens to unravel the already fragile fabric of society and everything Jack and Dr. Mia Ward have fought for.

But could a mysterious signal emanating from inside Greenland's ice sheet unlock the secrets hidden within our genome and prevent humanity's destruction?

From the frozen fields of Greenland to the bustling Indian subcontinent and the cobbled streets of Rome, the race is on to stop the deadliest countdown to extinction the human race has ever known.

Returning Characters from Book One:

Jack Greer: A geophysicist in his early forties, Jack is at times impulsive and irreverent, but dedicated to pursuing the truth, no matter where it might lead him. His main weaknesses include cigarettes, gambling and anything else that requires a modicum of willpower.

Mia Ward: A brilliant geneticist in her mid-thirties, Mia has struggled to get her life back on track. She is determined to do everything in her power to save her daughter from the ravages of Salzburg syndrome.

Anna: An android powered by artificial intelligence, Anna is the first of her kind. She is caring and highly competent and struggles to understand the irrationality of human behavior.

Gabby Bishop: A matronly figure and accomplished astrophysicist in her early fifties, Gabby is Jack's closest friend and colleague. Her level head is often a strong counterpoint to his tendency to jump in with both feet.

Dag Gustavsson: A Swedish paleontologist in his late twenties, Dag is a deep thinker who is quick to hide his vulnerable side with humor.

Grant Holland: At fifty-nine, Grant is a British-born biologist who's not afraid of exploring the vague boundaries between science and mysticism.

Rajesh Viswanathan: At thirty-two, Rajesh helped to pioneer Anna's creation, a move that has made him one of MIT's rising stars. To him, she is more than a machine. In a way, she is the daughter he never had.

Eugene Jarecki: A theoretical physicist in his early forties, Eugene masks his fears and insecurities with arrogance and bravado.

Admiral Stark: In his mid-fifties, Stark comes from a long line of Navy men. He may be a hard man to impress, but he's exactly the kind of guy you want on your side.

Ollie Cooper: Rugged and some might even say handsome, Ollie is a fifty-year-old former Sentinel agent eager to right his past wrongs. His greatest strength is loyalty. It might also be his greatest weakness.

*Any sufficiently advanced technology is
indistinguishable from magic.*

—Arthur C. Clarke

Chapter 1

The nineteen members of the Senate Intelligence Committee scowled down from the lofty heights of their oak bastions. Directly below them a line of photographers had taken up position, snapping hundreds, maybe even thousands of pictures as Jack Greer, Mia Ward and Admiral Stark struggled to hold firm under the incessant barrage of pointed questions.

“Then maybe you can explain to the members of this committee how agents of this group you call Sentinel were able to pose as naval intelligence and infiltrate a top-secret military operation?” Senator Al Johnson asked, his mouth less than an inch from the mic.

“We’ve been looking into that, Senator,” Admiral Stark replied, cutting a distinguished figure in his black Navy uniform. “Their credentials were spot-on. And at the time we believed the Atean ship was secure.”

Jack couldn’t help but smile at the admiral’s use of the now-popular social media moniker to describe Earth’s only known cosmic neighbors. Pronounced ‘Ah-tea-in,’ the nickname had originally been coined by a blogger who had based it on the close resemblance the aliens bore to praying mantises.

Beside him, Admiral Stark continued doing his best to punch his way out of a cardboard box.

“In summary, we suspect they might have had help from someone on the inside.”

A buzz ran through the audience.

Committee chairman Hatfield crossed his arms and leaned forward. “Can you be more specific?”

Stark shook his head. “At this point I’m afraid I can’t.”

“Well, as a former Navy man myself,” Senator Johnson cut back in, “I can tell you I’ve never seen such gross incompetence.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way, Senator,” Stark replied, coolly. “Since the moment we detected the vulnerability in our security protocol, federal intelligence agencies across the board have made identifying and apprehending members of Sentinel our top priority. To date, authorities in over fifty countries have effected hundreds of arrests. I can assure you, whatever Sentinel might have once been, it’s now but a shadow of its former self.”

Senator Johnson pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and

rubbed at his right eye. “That may be so, Admiral, but it still does not unwind the damage you people have already done. This body has been convened, at least in part, to determine which of you folks allowed a group of terrorists free rein within perhaps the most sensitive discovery of our time.”

Jack glanced over at Stark and watched as beads of sweat gathered on his brow. “With all due respect, Senator,” Jack interjected, “we were hundreds of meters beneath the Gulf of Mexico, facing about as chaotic a situation as you can imagine. I don’t think checking people’s IDs was first and foremost on anyone’s mind.”

“That may or may not be, Dr. Greer,” Johnson replied. “But nevertheless, these Sentinel folks were not only able to abscond with advanced technology”—he glanced down, flipping through the report Jack and Mia had put together on the mission—“they were also allowed to destroy a piece of machinery that might have been decades if not centuries ahead of anything we possess.”

“I would remind the senator,” Jack shot back, shifting in his seat, “by that point the blast wave was already destabilizing the limestone foundation upon which the ship was resting. Even if Sentinel had never set foot on that ship, the rock shelf would have collapsed all the same.”

“And yet what do we have to show for it?” Johnson asked, removing his glasses.

“Excuse me, sir?”

The senator stared at Jack. “By your own admission, Sentinel was able to remove pieces of advanced technology. My question to you is, what was the United States government able to salvage?”

Jack shook his head. “Nothing, I’m afraid. Our mission was to understand who these beings were and why they had come to earth.”

Mia put a hand on his leg, warning him he might be walking into a trap.

“I see. Thank you for that clarification, Doctor,” Johnson said gleefully. “And what did you learn in that regard?”

The tie around Jack’s neck was beginning to feel more like a noose. “Not nearly as much as we would have liked. We can say with confidence that the Atean ship impacted our planet approximately sixty-five million years ago, wiping out anywhere from seventy-five to ninety percent of the species on Earth. We know they were responsible for introducing new life into Earth’s ecosystem, including a small, furry-tailed mammal that would eventually evolve into human beings. And we also discovered that a tiny error in the genetic replication

process helped to create a gene in humans responsible for violence and aggression.”

The murmurs from the audience grew.

“I regret to inform you, Dr. Greer, that my God isn’t a little green man from Mars,” Johnson said with stinging disdain in his voice.

“If I may, Senator,” Mia cut in, “we don’t know what color they were. The bodies we found on board had been dead for many millions of years. That being said, I suppose the closest resemblance to a species classification on Earth would be an arthropod. And I can assure you, they were definitely not from Mars.”

“Are you mocking this committee?” Johnson asked, a line of redness moving up his neck.

“No, sir,” Mia replied. “I’m merely attempting to highlight that the scientists who descended to investigate the Atean ship did so without any preconceived notions about what they would find. Their personal beliefs, no matter how firmly held, would only have gotten in the way.”

“I’ve gone over your report,” Johnson said, holding up the thick stack of papers, “and it seems that none of you can tell me with any degree of certainty where these beings came from or why they chose the Earth as the site for their holocaust.”

Mia shook her head. “Given the short time we had on board the ship...”

“More to the point,” he went on, “you can’t give the American people or the citizens of the planet earth any sort of assurances these creatures aren’t intending to wipe us out the first chance they get.”

“You’re right,” she admitted. “As of yet, there was nothing we came upon that shed any light on a possible motive.”

“Dr. Ward, you’ve also testified earlier that the pulses of light emanating from the ship were largely to blame for the rash of medical complications experienced throughout the world.”

“That’s correct.”

“But once again, you can’t tell us how these alien beings were able to remotely alter the genes inside our bodies nor for what end.”

Once again, Mia shook her head. “We’re working on it.”

Johnson moved the mic closer to his lips. “So let the record show that in spite of the tome you and your colleague Dr. Greer have created for the committee, outlining the mission and the handful of discoveries you made, the most important question of all remains unanswered. Namely, why has the human race been earmarked for

destruction by an alien species we've never met?"

The room erupted in a cacophony of shouts.

"We've given you the facts as we know them," Jack said, raising his voice over the noise. "Telling you we don't have an answer yet isn't a license to insert conjecture. We're dealing with probably the most important event in human history. Forcing the scientific community to fill in the blanks simply because it'll put the public at ease would be irresponsible in the extr—"

The chamber doors burst open and six figures in black hoodies charged in holding what looked like hand grenades. Not far behind them were a dozen security guards as well as members of the capitol police. As the individual leading the group raised his hand to pull the pin, Jack rose from his seat and leapt through the air. His shoulder thudded into the man's ribs, knocking him to the ground, but the others behind him managed to pull their pins and chanted, "Wipe Earth clean!" before lobbing them. Even as the grenades spun through the air, thick streams of white smoke hissed from each of the canisters, filling the Senate hearing chamber with tear gas and chaos.

Chapter 2

The rain drummed against the black Cadillac's roof as it pulled up to the White House checkpoint. Crowds of protesters were outside, being held back by rows of police in riot gear. Some had signs reading, "Give peace a chance," while others toted an alien doll with a noose around its neck, shouting, "Human survival comes first." One guy even had a shirt with the words, "Never forget: *How to Serve Man* was really a cookbook."

The driver's window lowered and he addressed the White House security guard at the gate.

"Dr. Jack Greer and Dr. Mia Ward here to see the president."

The guard scanned the clipboard in his hands and then paused to peer into the back seat of the limo where Jack and Mia were waiting, both of them a bundle of nerves.

The guard then checked his watch. "Yeah, go ahead, POTUS should be arriving any minute now."

"The Senate hearing could have gone better," Jack said. His eyes were still red from the tear gas and his clothes bore a distinctly acrid smell.

Mia smiled at Jack's attempts to cheer her up. The truth was the hearing had been an unmitigated disaster. She understood people were scared and the senators were attempting to create the illusion of control over a situation that was anything but controlled.

She glanced out the back window, half expecting the Beast, as the president's limo was affectionately called, to be pulling up behind them. It wasn't. But over the pattering rain came the distant sound of a helicopter, a sound that grew louder as they approached the entrance to the West Wing, a three-story white structure that served as the office for the president and his staff.

Jack stepped out of the limo and watched Marine One fly in low and settle onto the South Lawn.

A young woman in a stormcloud-gray suit appeared from inside and ushered them out of the rain and into the building. From there, she led them down a long corridor. The offices on both sides were buzzing with frenetic activity. Ever since they had discovered and then lost the alien craft in the Gulf of Mexico, White House staff had been scrambling to respond to the veritable tsunami of media attention the Sentinel leaks had generated. And it hadn't only been the

American press. News outlets from around the world wanted to know who the aliens were and what they wanted. Jack couldn't blame them. He wanted to know as well.

The aide came to a stop before the Oval Office and spun around. "Would either of you like something to drink?" she asked with the hint of a Southern accent and an equal amount of Southern hospitality. "Water, tea, coffee?"

"How about some bourbon?" Jack asked, feeling his throat go dry.

The aide smiled, a streak of red lipstick smeared on one of her front teeth.

It wasn't every day you got a chance to brief the president. Jack glanced over at Mia, whose hands looked like a pair of squids battling for dominance. "You clean up good," he told her, grinning.

Mia glanced down at the navy-blue V-neck dress she was wearing. "Was all I could get on short notice." Her shoulder-length flame-red hair brushed against her cheeks. Her skin was still slightly bronzed from the brief time they'd spent on the *USS Grapple* following the mission. Mostly they had been compiling a detailed and top-secret report for the president and his cabinet. As important as that had been, Jack couldn't help but lament he hadn't gotten more time to get to know her.

"Nonsense, you look great," he said, nodding to the aide, who proceeded to swing open the door to the Oval Office and wave them inside. For some reason, Jack had expected they would be alone with the president, but quickly realized that particular calculation had been off base by a factor of ten. Nearly thirty men and women were standing in the Oval Office before them, half dressed in military uniforms, the rest in suits. Among those in suits were Vice-President Millard, the Secretaries of State, Treasury, and Defense, and the Speaker of the House. Added to that were two dozen other folks Jack recognized by face, but not by name or position.

The aide announced them to the room. "Geophysicist Dr. Greer and geneticist Dr. Ward are here on behalf of the mission sent to study the extraterrestrial craft in the Gulf of Mexico."

President Alexander Taylor came over and shook their hands, thanking them for all they had done. He was a tall, lean man with a strong grip and a piercing gaze, an intensity that was muted by the sad, almost melancholic quality in the man's stare. That along with his lanky build often elicited comparisons to Abraham Lincoln, a resemblance that had served him well during his election.

The room grew still as the chief of staff handed the president a

thick report.

“I’ve gone through what you wrote,” President Taylor told them. “I also spent some time going through the video you folks recorded through the fancy glasses you were wearing. It was fascinating stuff and yet I couldn’t help feeling there were a number of items missing from this report, blanks I’m hoping the two of you might be able to fill in for us.”

“We’ll do our best, Mr. President,” Mia offered with humility.

Jack couldn’t help but wonder what they might ask that the Senate committee had not already.

“You see,” Vice-President Millard said, gently easing himself into the conversation, “we’ve come into possession of certain information that we believe poses a grave threat to the security of our nation as well as the world at large. It’s still being analyzed by experts, mind you...”

“John, stop beating around the bush,” the president scolded him. “Just show them the pictures, will you?”

Vice-President Millard hesitated before leafing through a stack of folders, removing copies of an eight-by-ten glossy photograph and handing one to both Mia and Jack.

They stared at it for several minutes before the subject of the image came into sharp focus. The image was of an alien ship, perhaps identical to the one they had found beneath the Gulf. But this one wasn’t underwater, it was out in space—hell, it appeared to be somewhere in our solar system.

“Where was this taken?” Jack asked, trying not to let on that his pulse had just kicked a few notches higher.

A short Native woman in a red pantsuit stepped forward. “If you’ll allow me, Mr. President. I’m Dr. Diane Littlefield, administrator at NASA. The image was taken five days ago by Voyager One. At this very moment, a handful of astronomers are tracking the object. Judging by its current speed, distance and trajectory, the object will intersect with Earth in fourteen days, six hours and seven minutes. Give or take.”

“So you can understand the pickle we’re in,” the president said, deep lines forming in his forehead. “We need to know if whoever sent this thing means to wipe humanity off the face of the earth like they did the dinosaurs.”

It sounded like a logical question and Jack suddenly felt every eyeball in the room turn to him. He swallowed hard, his throat

making an audible clicking sound. He felt Mia's hand on his back, melting away at least some of the tension. "I mean, you're asking me to know the mind of an alien species. Seems like a tall order given that most of the time, we have no idea what the North Koreans or the Iranians are thinking."

Mia grinned weakly. "If you're asking us whether or not these beings are friendly, I'm not sure we can know that. At least not yet. The craft Jack and his team found buried was sixty-five million years old. If it wasn't for that ship impacting the earth, then none of us would be here today. And yet, when it struck, I'm sure for the dinosaurs it meant they were about to have a very bad day."

"What Mia—err, Dr. Ward—is trying to say," Jack started to explain, "is that terms such as 'good' or 'bad' depend on which end of the barrel you're staring down."

Secretary of State Chase roared from across the room, "Well, it just so happens that barrel is pointed straight at us. Mr. President, I urge you not to wait a moment longer. Unleash the full strength of our nuclear arsenal and vaporize this thing before it hits us."

The room erupted into a racket of differing opinions.

Secretary of Defense Myers spoke next. "Mr. President, the guidance systems on our nuclear weapons are all aimed at targets on earth. Those fired against the alien craft would first have to be reprogrammed and then attached to Atlas rockets if they were to have any chance of reaching the target. But there's a larger issue to consider. If these alien beings do come in peace and we destroy them, I think it's safe to say that could be the start of an inter-planetary war we could never hope to win."

Jack shook his head. "Frankly, Mr. President, I'm not even sure our weapons could put more than a dent in that ship."

"He may be right," the NASA director said. "I've gone through the report as well and the hull of the craft we studied was a largely unknown composite of extraordinary strength."

The president's normally stoic features betrayed the raw emotion roiling beneath the surface. "I got thirty percent of the armed forces on sick leave with God knows what. I got the Russians and the Chinese convinced we faked the ship's destruction. At this very moment, they're poking around our electronic infrastructure looking for secrets we don't have. Not to mention Cuba and those damned islands they keep building. On top of everything else, the country's scared as hell and on the verge of tearing itself apart. Just imagine how they'll react when news gets out they have two weeks before the

world's reduced to a pile of ash. If what you found in the Gulf is any indication, if these aliens mean to end the human race, I'm afraid to admit we don't have a shot in hell of stopping them. That's why I've secretly signed a directive ordering vital elements of our government deep underground. I've also recommissioned every Cold War bunker at our disposal. If the worst happens, at least some of us will remain to carry on."

Many in the room, including Jack and Mia, were speechless. Either attempt to blow it up before it hit or wait out the devastation. Which of the two was the worst option? That was what it seemed to be coming down to.

"Mr. President," Jack said. "You asked for our opinions on whether these aliens mean to do us harm, and I don't have any proof one way or another just yet, but my gut is telling me they don't."

The audible sound of scoffs burned Jack's ears.

"With all due respect, Dr. Greer," Vice-President Millard barked, "we can't very well base the future of the human race on your gut feeling." His gaze turned to Mia. "Dr. Ward, I understand you've been working on the genetic side of this. For goodness' sake, tell us you have something, anything more useful than your gut to draw on."

Jack felt himself shrink down to the size of a pea. He'd had strips torn off him by men far meaner than Vice-President Millard, but he knew his only recourse was to pull his shoulders back and stand up straight. This wasn't personal. It was about survival.

Mia unclasped her hands. "If I'm going to be frank, I wish we had more time. This is at once the most momentous period in the history of the human race and also the most perilous. The truth is, we learned a lot about the Atean race. Whether we like it or not, they are our creators. At the very least, they helped to set the circumstances in motion in which the human race evolved. We've also learned that human and alien DNA is remarkably similar. And locked within that DNA may very well lie the explanation for why this is happening and, if we're lucky, how to stop it.

"I know in many ways hearing this goes against everything we've been taught in our schools and churches about who we are and how we came to be. But if the data is accurate and we are their creation, I find it hard to believe they would slaughter us without giving it a second thought. My belief that their intentions are honorable is only bolstered by the fact that we've only ever found a single ship."

"Well, Doctor, that isn't entirely true," Secretary of Defense Myers offered.

Mia stopped dead. “Excuse me?”

“Our satellites picked up another blast wave. This one was much smaller and hasn’t triggered since then. Nevertheless, we did manage to narrow down the source of the blast to within a five-mile area.”

“Another ship?” Jack stammered, his mouth ajar.

“We’re not sure what it is,” the NASA administrator said, clearly trying to get Myers off the hook for attempting to explain subjects beyond his purview. “The intensity and quality of the signal is different. It’s denser and more refined. But the source has been traced to nearly two miles beneath the Greenland ice sheet.”

“How long have you known?” Mia asked, a pit of despair growing ever deeper within her. She had hoped with the ship and its debilitating blast wave now gone, she might have a shot at finding a workable cure. With a two-week deadline before possible Armageddon and the appearance of a new ship, it was all starting to seem rather hopeless.

“Five days,” Myers explained. “Which is why we immediately secured the area and dispatched a group of engineers to set up an arctic habitat and drill down through the ice. It’s called Northern Star Arctic Research Station. Of course, Greenland isn’t U.S. soil and so the Danish government was eager to supply scientists and military personnel to assist in the excavation.”

“The engineers are nearly done,” the president said. “Which is the final reason we brought you here. We’d like you to join them. You folks are the only ones with any first-hand experience and experience is the one thing that’s in short supply.”

The vice-president crossed his arms and leaned forward. “Admiral Stark will be overseeing the mission.”

“Admiral,” Jack said, surprised. “I thought he was a rear admiral?”

“Not anymore,” Myers replied.

The aide reappeared, ready to lead Jack and Mia back to the limo.

The president shook their hands once again. “Remember, everything discussed here today is top-secret. Head back to your people and get yourselves ready. You leave for Greenland in twenty-four hours.”

Chapter 3

Mia spent the majority of the trip back to Joint Base Andrews staring out the rain-spattered window. Flashing blue and red specks of light cast off from the government SUVs escorting them bounced around the limo's interior. They seemed to be struggling for her attention, like so much else at the moment. She glanced over at Jack, who had balled up his nice suit jacket and tucked it behind his head as a makeshift pillow. His chest rose and fell in a steady, serene rhythm. A part of her hated him for taking it all in stride.

Looking back, the meeting with the president had been a nerve-racking experience. Neither she nor Jack had expected to be put on the spot like that, expected to know with certainty whether the Ateans—she still had trouble accepting they'd been given a name—were friend or foe. It had made Mia feel naked and stupid for not having a better answer. And yet the longer she considered the president's question, the more she realized how ludicrous a thing it was to ask of them. Whatever these ancient beings had had in mind when they gave the planet a black eye all those millions of years ago could never be known, not with any degree of certainty at least. Besides, human beings, in any recognizable form, would not emerge for another sixty-three million years. Thus, attempting to categorize this alien race as either friend or foe of humanity was, for the time being, pointless.

Distant as they might seem, Mia felt a growing certainty the answers they sought were locked within the Salzburg chromatid. She recoiled, her hot breath fogging the car window. The mere thought of the disorder brought on fresh waves of guilt. Here she was, heading to Greenland in twenty-three hours, and yet there was still so much to be done to help reverse the crippling illness that had befallen the human race. In Greenland lay perhaps nothing but a wild and useless chase across a frozen landscape.

Jack would be there. That was good. She watched as he shifted, pushing himself deeper into the corner between the seat and the door. And what if the answers she sought lay locked somewhere beneath all that ice, just waiting to be discovered while she was off on a quixotic quest halfway around the world?

A hand touched her arm.

"Hey, go easy on yourself," Jack said, peering out at her from one tired eye. "I see threads of smoke coming out of your ears."

Mia grinned. "A woman's work is never done."

“Yeah, well, you won’t be much good to the team if you’re burned out.” He raked a hand through his messy hair and fixed her with a quizzical stare. “Knowing you, you’ve been replaying our conversation with the president and his cabinet, wondering how we did, whether we managed to convince him it was better to hold off on those nukes until we got a better handle on what was going on.”

She ignored his taunt. “I don’t think the president is dumb enough to think sending nukes into space will accomplish much more than irradiating the solar system. He struck me as a thoughtful and intelligent man.”

Jack sneered. “Those are the ones you gotta worry about.”

“His advisors, on the other hand, struck me as a little nuke-happy.”

“Most of them,” Jack replied. “Though I can’t say I totally blame them. I mean, we saw first-hand what happened the last time one of those things paid us a visit. For all we know, they’ve come to finish what they started.”

“Or to correct their mistake.”

Jack’s eyebrows rose. “That could be. Humans *are* pretty messed up. Hard to imagine anyone drawing up a list of our accomplishments and seeing any reason to keep us around.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Mia replied, marveling at Jack’s cynicism. “Maybe they’ve come back to fix our genetic flaw.”

His features dropped. “Which one? You mean the warrior gene?”

She nodded, hopeful.

“They don’t exactly strike me as the tinkering type. Not after they annihilated seventy-five percent of life on Earth for the sole purpose of repopulating in their own image. Besides, what took them so long? That’s a serious case of galactic procrastination.”

Mia grinned. “But what if you’re right?” she said, feeling the words plop out of her mouth like heavy lead ingots. “What if all we have left is two weeks and nothing we do will change that?”

Jack shook his head and crinkled his brow. “You heard the president say he intended to move the government and key personnel underground. The human race is resilient. With a lot of luck, we might just be able to weather the impact and save enough of us to carry on.”

“That’s not what I meant. Not really, at least. Isn’t there anyone you’d prefer to spend that time with—friends, family?”

She saw she was losing him. “I haven’t got family, not anymore.”

“Your parents are dead?”

Jack seemed to think this over for a moment before nodding. “The only people I really care about are in this limo and back at Andrews.”

Mia felt his sadness touch her heart and squeezed his hand. She hadn’t been expecting him to say that, certainly hadn’t been fishing for it either. Back on the USS *Grapple*, she had heard Gabby mention Jack’s biological father once in passing and the emotional chasm that lay between them. She was struck that even with an approaching Armageddon, Jack still wasn’t interested in healing old wounds.

“What do you think we’ll find in Greenland?” she asked.

Jack pulled his hand away and began rubbing circles with his thumb and index finger. His voice dropped into a low baritone. “Salvation.”

...

Joint Base Andrews was the love child of Andrews Air Force Base and the Naval Air Facility Washington. After passing through several checkpoints, the convoy arrived before hangar five. The incessant rain had finally let up and Jack and Mia made their way toward the long vertical slit between the massive doors. Inside sat Air Force One and her twin sister, arranged side by side. Few knew that more than a single plane was responsible for ferrying the president around the world. The duplicate often acted as a decoy and would fly out ahead of the commander-in-chief in order to ensure the skies were indeed as friendly as they seemed.

To the left of the president’s gleaming airplanes was a two-story structure that ran the length of the hangar. A long row of lit windows disappeared into infinity. Groups of Air Force mechanics and other personnel moved throughout the space. They entered the mechanic’s shop to find Anna standing before a mirror.

Jack felt his jaw grow slack. As promised, those geniuses from Boston Dynamics along with scientists from DARPA had given her a tremendous gift. Gone were the variable-drive wheels, left behind as they had abandoned ship. In their place was a sleek pair of metallic, multi-jointed legs. Anna’s torso was also new, silver chrome plating with the added bonus of a distinctly feminine shape. The narrow waist was a nice touch, Jack thought, along with the arms and hands which had been covered with a shiny grey aluminum alloy. The only part that remained unchanged was Anna’s head and the distinctly human features projected against the back of her glass faceplate.

Jack heard the muted sound of clicking as Anna blinked. “Oh, tell me you’re not taking selfies,” he said, stifling a burst of laughter.

Anna rotated at the waist, her legs following suit. Suddenly a beaming smile filled her face. She lifted one of her shimmering arms in greeting. “Dr. Greer, Dr. Ward, welcome back. I trust your visit with President Taylor was productive.” She walked toward them without a hint of awkwardness.

“It’s like you’ve had legs your entire life,” Mia said, impressed.

“I have been practicing,” Anna confided. “Dr. Greer, do you also find stairs challenging?”

Jack frowned. “Do I look that out of shape?”

“On the contrary,” she replied. “I meant for a man of your age.”

Anna still couldn’t tell when she was inserting one of her new metallic feet into her digital mouth.

“You get ‘em, Anna,” Mia said, punching Jack in the shoulder.

Anna’s features fell. “I apologize if I caused you distress, Dr. Greer. I was merely inquiring. You see, the coding Dr. Viswanathan provided for climbing stairs did not account for the presence of a railing, or unevenly placed steps, so I was forced to make several modifications. There are still a few imperfections present, but I am confident I will get the hang of it soon enough.”

“We all learn to walk and climb in our own time,” Jack assured her. “I’m certain Rajesh’s program, imperfect as it was, was only intended to get you started.”

Anna’s reply was drowned out by Dag entering the workshop holding a BLT on wholewheat bread.

“Jack! I see the president fought the urge to throw you two in jail,” he said, wiping a glob of mayo from the side of his mouth.

“Aren’t you a vegan?” Jack asked, eyeing the dangling strip of bacon with envy.

Dag glanced down at his sandwich and chuckled. “Vegetarian, and this ain’t real bacon. It’s called bacon and it’s not bad at all. Head into the canteen and they’ll make you one.”

The side of Jack’s mouth crinkled. “Sorry, but you lost me after fake bacon.” He grew serious. “Grab the others, will you? There’s something important they need to hear and there isn’t a lot of time.”

Dag motioned over his shoulder. “They were right behind me a second ago.”

A moment later, Gabby, Rajesh, and Eugene appeared. The two men were in a heated debate about Han Solo’s Kessel Run and

whether George Lucas really knew a parsec was a measurement of space and not time.

“I have the utmost confidence the man knew what he was saying,” Rajesh bellowed, animating his point with exasperated hand movements. Depending on your point of view, the Indian computer engineer was either plump or cuddly.

Facing off against him was Eugene Jarecki. The fortysomething theoretical physicist was better known as the director and sole member of the OOSA (Office for Outer Space Affairs). In spite of his thinning hair and slight stature, the guy had the unlikely combination of Steve Buscemi’s looks and Brad Pitt’s confidence.

“Lucas didn’t know what the hell he was talking about,” Eugene said, his voice marked with a nasal pinch. “He got caught fair and square and tried to cover with some lame story about the Millennium Falcon’s navigation system being so sophisticated it was able to calculate a straighter path through hyperspace.”

Gabby raised her arms in a painful-looking shrug. “Don’t we have better things to worry about than some cheesy, irrelevant sci-fi movie?” Her round, caring face was framed by shoulder-length silver hair. But what the troubled expression on her face really said was, *If I have to listen to one more second of this, someone’s going to get hurt.*

Eugene and Rajesh spun in unison.

“Cheesy?” Eugene exclaimed, his features squished up with shock and horror.

Rajesh’s eyes narrowed. “Irrelevant?”

Dag rushed over and gripped Rajesh by the shoulders, as though wrangling a potentially dangerous animal. “Easy, big fella.”

“Dr. Greer,” Anna said. “There is something I...”

Mia raised a hand. “All of you need to just quiet down and hear what we have to say.”

“But, Dr. Greer,” Anna continued.

“Not now,” Jack said, focused. “Mia’s got the floor.” He nodded, encouraging her to go on.

Mia began by recounting their meeting with the president and his cabinet.

“Nukes?” Dag said, shaking his head in disbelief. “I get that everything’s on the table, but is that even feasible?”

“Hard to say,” Jack admitted. “Luckily, the president wasn’t a fan

of the idea either.”

Gabby grabbed the corners of her elbows. “With only two weeks before impact, I can only imagine what the country’s going to think when they find out. Every major city will see rioting and lawlessness rise to unprecedeted levels.”

Nodding, Mia said: “Especially when word gets out that the government plans on hiding out in bunkers while the rest of us are left to fry or suffocate from falling ash.”

“And this new signal in Greenland,” Rajesh wondered. “Do you think it could be another ship?”

“They weren’t certain,” Mia replied. “A military team is already in place prepping the site for our arrival.” Her voice fell ever so slightly.

“My mother,” Gabby said, biting her cheek. “I need to warn her.”

Jack’s lips drew into a thin line. “I’m afraid word of the approaching ship must never get out. Gabby’s right. It would cause a panic and make an already terrible situation that much worse. Look, I’m not here to force any of you to come with me. I know some may wish to spend what time remains with loved ones. You’ll get no second-guessing or judgment from me on the matter. I simply want you to consider one thing. If the Ateans have indeed returned for an encore performance, if, like the dinosaurs before us, this is our turn to get wiped off the planet, I for one won’t go down without a fight. And let’s not fool ourselves. We all know missiles and bombs likely won’t stand much of a chance of stopping this thing. As far as I can see, our only hope lies with whatever’s hiding beneath Greenland’s ice sheet.”

Mia crossed her arms and turned to Anna. “Or perhaps the answer is hidden in our DNA.”

“Dr. Greer,” Anna said, stepping forward just as a new figure appeared in the doorway.

Jack and the others turned to see Grant. His face was still unusually sunburnt, but he was standing on his own two feet, without a crutch in sight.

The room exploded with shouts of joy and shock. Dag ran over and pulled him into a hug and then stepped back to inspect the fifty-nine-year-old biologist. “Your hip? Shouldn’t you be in the hospital?”

If anything, Grant looked healthier and perhaps even fuller than usual.

“The heck were those nurses feeding you?” Eugene asked, a touch of jealousy in his voice.

Grant shook his head, his long fingers interlaced over his abdomen. “Quite honestly, ladies and gentlemen, I couldn’t tell you. The initial X-rays showed my hip was fractured in three places. And then two days later I’d gained ten pounds and was back on my feet.”

Mia eyed Grant with curiosity and no small amount of incredulity. “Were you prescribed any medication?”

Grant’s gaze fixed on an invisible spot on the ceiling. “Some painkillers. The doctors were just as surprised as I was. They didn’t even have a chance to get me into surgery.”

“Did they do any blood tests?” Mia asked.

Grant nodded. “A bunch and they all came back clean.”

“I’d like to take another sample, if that’s all right.”

“Be my guest.”

Jack felt a gentle tug on his arm. Anna had been desperate to get his attention. “Yes, Anna? What is it you wanted to tell me?”

“When Admiral Stark first arrived on the platform in the Gulf of Mexico,” she began, “he informed you that NASA had detected a binary code hidden within the gamma-ray burst.”

“Yes, I remember, but they had no clue what it meant.” The cloudy expression on Jack’s face slowly faded as he began to see where this was heading. “You cracked it, didn’t you?” he asked excitedly.

Dag, seated on an office chair, crossed the six-foot distance between them in less than a second. “It’s probably some sort of secret message,” the young paleontologist said in awe. “Like those decoder rings they used to put in cereal boxes.”

“Maybe it’s an earful about what a piss-poor job we’re doing caring for the planet,” Gabby said with no small amount of irony.

Anna looked from one to another. The onslaught of real and sarcastic hypotheses was threatening to overwhelm her sensors. “An image, it is said, is worth a thousand words. In this case, I suspect it may count for a whole lot more.”

Chapter 4

Striding along on her brand-new legs, Anna led them to an adjacent room where Rajesh had set up the computer equipment they'd been using on the rig. Adam and Leah sat before laptops, poring over Anna's data logs and studying her progress. They nodded briefly before burying their heads back into reams of computer code.

"She's becoming more and more efficient every day," Rajesh said, eyeing Anna's slick new figure. "These last few days we've been working to perfect her most recent form of locomotion. First came flat ground and stairs."

The sparkle in Rajesh's eyes as he spoke about Anna made it perfectly clear that to him, she was more than a piece of high-tech machinery. She was his child.

"Next we will tackle uneven terrain and ladders," the computer engineer said, his full lips puckered into a soft smile.

"You better throw in some ice cleats while you're at it," Jack said, grinning.

Rajesh grew quiet for a moment. "Do you really think it's wise to bring her to Greenland?" he asked.

Jack threw him a look. "I know how much Anna means to you, but I wouldn't dream of leaving her behind. I promised you once before I wouldn't let anything happen to her and I make that same commitment to you again."

Rajesh was in the process of mulling this over when Jack turned to Anna, now seated before one of the laptops. She inserted a USB cable into the computer, linking herself to the device. At once, the screen began to populate with a series of zeros and ones. The others gathered behind them, staring with wonder at the flood of data.

"You are observing the raw binary data NASA scientists extracted from the gamma-ray burst," Anna explained.

Mia leaned in for a closer look. For her, this wasn't merely an exercise in curiosity. By all accounts, the blast wave appeared to be how the ship was manipulating Salzburg, populating the chromatid with the ruinous genes currently affecting more than a third of the planet's population.

"As you can see, Dr. Greer, without a key, the zeros and ones before you are little more than a meaningless jumble."

"Sorta like static on a TV?" Dag said, the ghost of his BLT still

lingering on his breath.

Anna regarded him with a touch of confusion at the reference.

"Before her time," Rajesh explained. "The only television she watches is on the internet."

"Think of radio static then," Jack offered.

Anna nodded. "Yes, I understand now."

As impressive as she was, even Mia could see that certain simple references still went over her head.

"Tell us how you cracked it then," Grant said, growing impatient.

"It was Dr. Ward who helped me," Anna admitted.

That was news to Mia. Although she was quick to recall the headache she had felt after searching the Salzburg genome for signs of a coherent message.

"The key to the equation is the number thirty-seven," Anna pointed out.

"Oh, I get it," Eugene said, pushing his way through those gathered around Anna and the laptop. "You simply selected every thirty-seventh byte. Child's play." Eugene did everything but blow hot air on his knuckles and rub them against his shoulder.

"Incorrect, I'm afraid, Dr. Jarecki," Anna replied evenly. "Thirty-seven is a prime number. Which is to say, a whole number which can only be divided by itself and the number one. The first thirty-seven prime numbers are as follows: two, three, five, seven, eleven, thirteen, seventeen, nineteen, twenty-three, twenty-nine—"

"Okay," Jack said, unbuttoning his shirt and removing his tie. "We get the point. Just tell us what you did next."

"My apologies, Dr. Greer, I will speed up my explanation." Anna's speech became slightly faster and higher-pitched. "I selected the binary digits which corresponded to the first thirty-seven prime numbers and repeated the process until all of the excess data had been stripped away. From there, I laid the data out in the form of a thirty-seven-bitmapped image."

"Why not the regular twenty-four?" Rajesh asked, surprised. It appeared he was also learning about this for the first time as well.

"Trial and error," she responded, coolly. "I attempted many thousands of iterations without arriving at a recognizable image. It was only after I returned to practicing my stair work that I thought of using a larger-sized bitmap. Besides, there was a symmetry to the

puzzle's solution I found appealing."

"Hell, soon enough she'll be writing poetry and painting landscapes," Dag said, only half-joking.

The others grew deathly still, their gazes fixed on the laptop as Anna showed them the process in action. First a series of zeros and ones dropped away, creating a new string of binary data. Then those bytes were being inputted into a thirty-seven-bitmapping program.

Slowly, the image of an X appeared.

All present stared with raw intensity, trying to understand the significance of what they were seeing. The X didn't have the neat, tapered lines from the letter they all knew from the English alphabet. For some reason, the edges were puffy and uneven.

For Mia, it was the shorter length of the top part of the X which gave it away. This wasn't part of the English language. They were looking at a pair of chromatids connected by a centromere. Put another way, they were looking at a full chromosome. But the implications didn't stop there. This wasn't some random chromosome. They were looking at Salzburg, but not as they knew it in its present form. The Salzburg syndrome Alan had discovered, the same one Mia had tracked as it spread across the globe, had been no more than a single chromatid. What she was seeing here was something else altogether. She was seeing the endgame. Not Salzburg in its current form, but what Salzburg would soon become. It was changing, mutating, growing. The realization chilled the marrow in Mia's bones, since it meant that a whole new batch of genes would soon begin to appear. The human race, along with all life on earth, was about to face an even greater threat.

Chapter 5

By the time Mia was done explaining what they were seeing, it was clear she hadn't done much to lighten the mood in the room.

"So not only is a doomsday ship heading straight for us," Dag said, rubbing his temples in slow circles, "now you tell us the genetic disorder that's crippling the world is about to get a whole lot worse."

"I'm not sure about the rest of you," Grant said. "To my eye, it's beginning to look like these aliens, whoever they are, want us dead and gone."

"But for what purpose?" Jack asked, genuinely curious to hear the biologist's response.

Eugene shrugged. "Hell, for all we know they want our resources."

Gabby pushed a lock of her silver hair out of her face and was about to light up a cigarette before pausing in the act. "That's patently ludicrous. What could we have on earth that doesn't exist in countless other places throughout the solar system and even the galaxy? If they're after liquid water, they've got Europa, Enceladus and Ganymede. They want ice for their mojitos? Then their options just got a whole lot better. Metals and minerals are pretty much the same story."

"I believe we've already agreed humans don't make optimal slaves," Rajesh added, a hint of hope in his voice. "For one, we're far too squishy."

Grant winked at Rajesh. "Speak for yourself. But our friend here does have a point. If they were looking for a work force, any sufficiently advanced civilization would be far better off building them."

Dag pointed at Anna. "Case in point. I mean, if Elon Musk's prediction about AI leading to the end of the human race is even ten percent accurate, we won't have a hope in hell."

Anna turned, her digital features filled with apparent sadness. "I can assure you, Dr. Gustavsson, we have no desire to endanger your species."

"Maybe not yet," Grant chimed in. "In fact, there's a mighty good chance you may not feel much of anything right now that hasn't already been programmed for you to feel, but give it time. Even the rosiest of relationships have a nasty habit of souring. Just ask my ex-wife."

Gabby was sure the blame rested squarely at humanity's feet. "I think we're being punished for trashing the planet. We're like that neighbor on your street who keeps Airbnbing his house to college kids. Eventually, someone needs to step in and put a stop to it."

"Are we the lousy neighbor or the college kids?" Dag asked, confused.

Jack and Mia laughed.

"I'm not sure," Gabby said, shaking her head and fighting a smile. "Maybe both. All I know for sure is my head is starting to hurt."

After clearing his throat, Jack said: "As humans, we have an ego-driven need to make everything about us. Have any of you even considered the possibility that we aren't the prime targets for what's happening?"

Jack's comment took the room aback.

"How could it not?" Eugene nearly shouted. "Aren't we the ones bearing the brunt of what's going on?"

"Jack may have a point," Grant said. "One we haven't fully considered yet. Stepping on an ant hill on your way to work doesn't signal any malice on your part. For the ants, however, it might be catastrophic." Grant locked eyes with Gabby, the astrophysicist. "If we found out tomorrow that the sun was going supernova, a process which would annihilate all life on earth, surely you wouldn't think the sun was punishing us for any perceived sins."

"That isn't a fair comparison, since the sun isn't a sentient being," Gabby said.

"That has yet to be proven," Grant replied.

The grin on Dag's face grew three sizes bigger. "Give our esteemed Dr. Holland time and he'll be more than happy to tell you all about his theory on morphic fields and the interconnectedness of all things. It'll blow your mind."

Gabby shook her head and slid the cigarette back into the pack. "I think it's already working."

Dag peeled away, brushing past two Air Force mechanics who were heading through the computer lab and into the hangar.

As the party broke up, Mia drew closer to Anna. "Can I ask you something?"

Anna twisted to face her. On anyone else but her, it might have made for a rather unsettling sight. "I enjoy answering questions. Did you want to know my opinion on the extraterrestrials' motivation for

interacting with our planet?”

“Uh, I...yeah, sure, go ahead.”

“I believe they did not intend for us to discover their presence.”

Mia tilted her head, trying to grasp Anna’s point. “Do you think they mean us harm?”

Anna blinked. “I tend to agree with Dr. Greer. Their intention to do harm may be secondary to the rule of unintended consequences.”

“Do you think they know we’re here?”

“That is impossible to conclude with any certainty,” Anna replied. “However, if you would like me to formulate a hypothesis on the matter, I would say they do not.”

Mia thought about the Atean ship hurtling through space towards earth. “Then we need to somehow find a way of telling them. You learned their language. Couldn’t we beam a message at their ship asking them to stop?”

A glimmer of hope appeared on Anna’s face. “That is certainly worth attempting.” She reached a hand to disconnect herself from the laptop before pausing. “Was there anything else?”

“Yes,” Mia said, feeling a surge of anxiety over the question she was about to ask. “You know the process that you used to decode the signal imbedded in the blast wave? Did you try applying that same thing toward the Salzburg genome?”

Anna nodded. “I am sorry to say that my attempts to apply the key to Salzburg have so far not been successful. Rest assured I am constantly running alternative methods in the background.”

Although that wasn’t the answer Mia had wanted, it was certainly the one she had expected. Life never seemed to give you what you wanted. It gave you a sprinkle of what you needed and left you perched on a limb to figure the rest out for yourself. But before entertaining any thoughts of flying off to Greenland and whatever awaited them there, there was something Mia needed to do first.

Chapter 6

“And what pisses me off the most,” Trish Han shouted, pacing back and forth behind the desk in her office, “is that you went over my head to Ron Lewis and made me look like an asshole.”

The stress ball Trish was working feverishly in her left hand didn’t seem to be quite doing the job and she tossed it at the glass wall. It bounced back with enthusiasm, only to plop on the floor and roll to a stop. As Lifestyle editor at the *Washington Post*, stress was nothing new. Neither was dressing down young reporters who had grown far too big for their britches.

The young reporter before her listened intently to Trish’s list of grievances, her face a mask of neutrality. Christened Kayza Mahoro, a Rwandan name meaning ‘beautiful,’ she had decided early on, mostly out of mercy for her friends, colleagues and neighbors, to simply go by Kay. It elicited fewer confused looks and long explanations which mostly went something like this:

“What an interesting name. Where are you from?” she was often asked, as they surveyed her dark skin and short afro.

“America.”

Her curt response was often met with a mix of shame and embarrassment for the insensitive way the question had been phrased.

“If you’re asking about my parents, they came from Rwanda.”

“Ohh,” they would say, and quickly change the subject.

When it came to Rwanda, most everyone knew two things. That a terrible genocide had taken place there in the early 90s. And that the Hutus were responsible. Not surprisingly, the complexities of tribal politics in that part of east Africa were often lost on them, just as the complexities of American politics would baffle the average Rwandan goat farmer.

Kay was a Hutu, born five years after the genocide in a country thousands of miles away, and yet the prevailing narrative of Hutu guilt seemed to follow her throughout her life. She found that more often than not, it was simply better to avoid the topic entirely. But avoiding never meant lying. She was proud of who she was. Her father was a former diplomat, her mother an employee at the state bank. They had been at a posting in Ethiopia when the war broke out in April of ’94. Back in Rwanda they had had land, houses and a large

extended family. Within three months all of that was gone. It had been a terrible shock they had never fully recovered from. Telling the truth about what had really happened there and why was of tremendous importance to Kay. She wanted to set the record straight and do what she could to remove the kind of stigma that made speaking with strangers an often painful experience.

It was for these reasons that she had wanted to become a reporter in the first place. And, to a greater or lesser degree, it was why she was sitting in Trish Han's ultra-modern, glass-walled fishbowl of an office, listening to her editor try to tear her a new one.

Kay felt there were important stories that needed to be told and covering the opening of art galleries and celebrity gossip for the Lifestyle section just wasn't cutting it.

"I bumped into Ron at lunch the other day," Kay tried to explain. "And he said the news section had an opening if Lifestyle could spare me."

Ron Lewis was the news editor, a crusty relic from a bygone era famous for his refusal to use a computer until Sandy Yeats, the editor-in-chief, threatened to fire his ass if he didn't. Disheveled and often unshaven, Ron was one of the best in the business.

Trish halted her apparent mission to wear a hole in the carpet and stood with her arms folded over her chest. "That's all good and fine, Kay, but I'm sorry, I simply can't afford to spare you. You're the best I've got. Kanye's new fashion line breaks in two days and I need you on it."

Kay felt her heart drop down through her chair and tumble into a bottomless pit. "I'm done asking celebrities asinine questions about things that don't matter. Besides, Kanye's clothes all look the same. Beige and with more holes than a colander. Send Sarah, she loves that stuff."

Trish combed back a swath of thin black hair behind her ear as she sat down. Although calmer than before, she didn't seem particularly swayed by Kay's arguments. "Sarah's busy with something else. Maria and Brianne are off for medical reasons. So are Kelly, Roger and the two others I just hired to replace them."

"That's exactly my point," Kay said, attempting one final run at the wall. "People all over the world are falling sick. We just discovered an alien ship on earth. Countries around the world are struggling to maintain order. Millions are convinced the end of the world is coming and you wanna pretend like none of it matters."

Trish rooted through a desk drawer and came out with a white

envelope. “I agree with you, Kay. Those stories are important and that’s why the paper has reporters covering them. But you weren’t hired for that. You were hired to tell the world about celebrities. What they like. What they don’t like. Who they’re fighting with. It might not seem like much, but a little distraction these days can go a long way.” Trish handed Kay the envelope.

She hesitated before taking it. “Am I being fired?”

Trish smiled. “Far from it. It’s your ticket to Kanye’s fashion show in New York tomorrow. I don’t have the luxury of firing you, even if I wanted to. But don’t test me. And leave Ron Lewis alone.”

•••

Kay’s march back to her desk was filled with humiliation and despair. While the glass walls in Trish’s office might have muted their voices a touch, it offered the reporters outside an unobstructed view of the action inside. Kay had gotten reamed. They didn’t know exactly why, but the whys never seemed to matter much.

Ellis Dow, a string bean of a guy who covered home renovations, popped up above his cubicle, one of the few non-transparent partitions in their ultra-modern head office. “Kay got in trouble,” he sang. His juvenile quip elicited a cackle of laughter from the doorknobs who sat around him.

It was hard to imagine Ellis in charge of anything, let alone a gaggle of idiots. His father had been a famous reporter and had shoehorned his useless son into a cushy job.

“You’ll get her next time, champ,” he called after her.

Kay raised her middle finger and held it over her shoulder as she walked away.

She arrived back at her desk to the persistent sound of pinging. Kay pulled the phone from her pocket and saw a Facebook message pop up a second before disappearing. Her eye caught sight of the word ‘lied’ before it went away. Then another muffled sound, this one coming from the laptop on her desk, scattered with documents and papers. Kay swore on a daily basis she would put some order into her workspace and every day she seemed to find a perfectly valid reason why the whole endeavor would have to wait.

After pushing aside fashion magazines and copies of recent articles she’d written, her laptop soon emerged. The cover was open and the act of clearing away the dreck had woken it from a deep sleep. She stared down at the screen and saw an email waiting for her. She slid into her seat. Someone had contacted her through her blog. It was a

side project of sorts she used to address an eclectic assortment of topics close to her heart. Some had to do with social and political issues in Africa, others with problems in D.C. Her most recent blog post about free speech on university campuses had gone viral. “Is our education system teaching intolerance?” The title had been a touch hyperbolic, but it had served Kay’s purpose of asking tough questions, the kind too many folks felt were best left unexamined.

Kay read through the short, enigmatic email three times.

I have something for you. Open Facebook.

The note had been signed...

Laydeezman

A chill ran up the back of Kay’s legs as she stood, glaring around the open work space. A few of her colleagues were on the phone, others were typing away, immersed in their work. She swore, if this was Ellis playing one of his stupid little pranks, she was ready to pay a visit to HR and have the “Laydeezman’s” derrière tossed to the curb.

Kay went to her phone and the direct message she’d received on the Facebook app. It too was from the same source. Except this one was different.

The public is being lied to. And I have proof.

Kay clicked on the profile. It led her to a page with no picture or identifying information, only a name: Laydeezman.

Normally guys named Laydeezman would send her barely literate messages online like “Yo, sup, sexy lady?” or invitations to join them in lewd and unspeakable sex acts. The urge to ignore the messages was strong. Stronger still was the desire to reply, if only to validate that either Ellis or some other bozo was aiming to have a laugh at her expense.

Kay centered the cursor and began typing. *Who is this and why are you wasting my time?*

She decided to open the envelope Trish had handed her while she waited. As promised, inside was a single ticket for the New York fashion show. Kay stared down at the intricate design, wondering what outfit she would need to wear to avoid committing a fashion faux pas. God forbid if you happened to be wearing the spring collection in summer. And Kanye’s loathing for reporters was a well-documented fact.

The whole charade was in the process of tying her insides into tight little knots when the reply came back. Actually, it was an

attachment without any words.

She could hear the disembodied voice of Lucas De Silva, the flamboyant and overworked IT guy, telling her not to open that attachment. She hovered the cursor over it and paused.

“That’s right, Kay,” his ghost voice sing-songed into her ear. “Move that cursor up to the X and close that browser window. No sudden movements. Just keep it nice and slow.”

Instead, Kay clicked the attachment, banishing Lucas’ apparition from her thoughts. What opened was an image of a man and woman. The picture was too close to see much other than they were standing wearing visitors’ badges. A fresh ping signaled the arrival of a new picture. This time she clicked without any hesitation. The image was almost the same, only this time there was more of it. Suddenly Kay began to grasp what she was looking at. The picture had been taken inside the Oval Office. She downloaded a copy and opened it inside a photo viewer, which she used to zoom in on the visitor tags hanging around the man’s and woman’s necks. Dr. Jack Greer and Dr. Mia Ward. She’d never heard of them. If Laydeezman was trying to pick her up, so far he was doing one hell of a good job.

Then came another soft ping. This time a bunch of strange numbers and symbols showed up.

38°53'15.59" 77°00'26.40"

“What is this?” Kay asked, perplexed.

Grief weeps on history’s shoulder. Be there at 9 p.m. sharp. Follow history’s gaze. There you will find proof I am the real deal.

And with that, Laydeezman was offline. Kay sat staring at the message, wondering what she’d gotten herself into. If it wasn’t that asshole Ellis, could her fiancé Derek be pulling her leg? He was a young investment banker with a promising future. Not exactly the prime candidate to punk someone.

Kay stared at the numbers. They looked like GPS coordinates. Latitude and longitude. She highlighted them from the message she’d been sent and pasted it into Google. Right away a page came up for the Peace Monument right here in D.C. It was a large statue built in 1877 to commemorate sailors killed during the Civil War.

Kay glanced down at her phone. 6:23 P.M. Two and a half hours before nine o’clock. But this was crazy. She wasn’t going to start running around the city on a scavenger hunt. For all she knew, some psycho would be there waiting to murder her... or worse. On the other hand, this Laydeezman character had pictures from inside the

White House. Pictures that hadn't been published. Which meant this Laydeezman character hadn't simply gone hunting for them online. Her innate sense of curiosity was engaged in a pitched battle with her common sense and already she had a feeling which side was going to win.

Chapter 7

Mia knocked on the door to room 225. They were somewhere outside Richmond on the second floor of a Motel 6. The two-hour drive from Joint Base Andrews meant it was nearly ten o'clock. But she knew this might be her only opportunity.

Behind her stood two FBI agents the government had assigned as part of her security detail. They wore jeans and loose-fitting windbreakers, all part of a rather dismal effort to blend in and appear less conspicuous. She knew next to nothing about them because they had hardly said more than a handful of words since they had met. She had been able to gather that the thinner one named Ramirez had a serious addiction to Doritos and the shorter, stocky one named Chalk always had a toothpick in his mouth and, when he thought no one was looking, he would use his tongue to flip it end over end.

Sven had been another man of few words. A part of the big guy had been shattered by Tom's death, especially since it had been at Sentinel's hands. He hadn't spoken of it, hadn't needed to. She could tell by the hardened gaze in his eye and how the fingers of his right hand kept knotting up as though they were squeezing the life out of someone. When the Navy helicopter had brought them to Ellington Field, Sven had told her there was something he needed to take care of. That she was in good hands now and that he would see her again soon. After that he had pulled her into a hug that was one part boa constrictor, two parts father figure. Just the same, she was sad to see him go, but hopeful they would meet again soon.

"Who is it?" a voice challenged from the other side of the door.

"Mia Ward," she replied.

There was a pause before the latch clicked and the door opened. It was a man she didn't recognize and for a second she wondered if she had the wrong room. Then, over the man's shoulder, she spotted Paul, sitting on the bed with a remote control in his hand.

"Sven sends his regards," Mia told the guy at the door.

The man nodded, a former Sentinel agent himself, now working for the other side. "And Tom?"

That sting again as she realized the pain of his loss was still so raw and that it might remain that way for some time. Something about the change in her expression had said it all. "He was one of our top agents," he said, seeming to shake off the sudden feeling of grief, the way some try to shake off a cold sweat. Almost robotically, he moved

past her and the FBI men and stepped outside. Mia turned long enough to see him grip the railing, the muscles in his arms growing taut.

Paul came up from the bed and stood there, not entirely sure if he should hug her or not. Maybe not entirely sure he wanted to.

"I'm glad to see you," he said, searching for the right words. "Does this mean we can go?"

Her eyes brushed against the tacky carpet at his feet.

"I'm not here to rescue you," she told him. "There's a good chance they'll move you in another day or so."

Paul pushed the palm of his hand against his temple. "I'm going nuts in here, Mia. Stuck in this room all day. Eating fast food morning, noon and night. And then the parade of strange people who keep coming in to check on Zoey. I don't know if she's in a coma, but she's being fed through a tube and probably needs to be in a proper hospital."

Mia glanced past Paul to the bed he'd been sitting on and the tiny lump beneath the covers. Between the wall and the bed was an IV stand. She sat down next to her daughter and peeled back the covers. Zoey's skin was warm to the touch and rosy in color, similar to Grant and so many others affected by Salzburg.

"Hey, honey," she said, brushing back a patch of her daughter's hair. "How's my big girl doing?"

Zoey's eyes slowly opened and blinked away the light.

"You remember how I woke you up that one morning singing, 'Time to make the donuts?' And you jumped out of bed so excited? It was the jingle from those old Dunkin' Donuts commercials. I didn't realize until you started crying that you were too young to know it was just an expression. I guess the real lesson was that sometimes parents say things without thinking. You must have cried for hours and I felt like a bag of crap for putting something in your head that had no business being there in the first place."

Zoey stared back at her with a blank expression. There didn't seem to be an ounce of recognition.

It was hard enough seeing her daughter like this. But it somehow seemed so much worse that her little girl didn't seem to know who she was. "I always hated to see you sad, baby girl, but right about now I'd take sad over this." Mia fought back the tears threatening to roll over her lids and down her cheeks. The only consolation was being close and stroking her hair, the way she used to do every night putting Zoey

to bed.

She took her daughter's tiny hand and squeezed before staring down. Zoey's fingers looked thicker than she remembered. Kids grew by leaps and bounds, she knew that, but this wasn't normal growth, especially from a young girl who'd been eating through a tube. Normally, the body tended to become thinner, in some cases emaciated. The extremities were the first to reveal the tell-tale signs the body wasn't getting everything it needed. But more than food, exercise was what kept a child lean and muscular. And as with the three hundred and forty days astronaut Mark Kelly had spent aboard the International Space Station, time spent in a zero-G environment would result in a loss of muscle and bone mass. To a greater or lesser degree, patients in a coma or a wheelchair experienced the same thing. Newton's laws of motion were quite clear—use it or lose it.

Mia stood and yanked back the covers.

The move alarmed Paul. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Zoey's arms and legs," she replied. "They look thicker than normal."

"Of course, we're taking excellent care of her."

"I'm sure you are, but this doesn't look normal, Paul. I need to take a blood sample."

"Our daughter may be dying and you're worried about her weight?" Paul's hands were clasped together, his face a mask of incredulity.

"Stop being ridiculous," she shouted. "I don't give a damn about her looks. But people in her situation don't bulk up like this." Mia gently squeezed the length of her daughter's leg. That was when an image of Grant flashed before Mia's eyes. The robust way he had looked when he showed up at Andrews, when days earlier he had been suffering from a catastrophic hip fracture.

Mia turned to one of the FBI agents. "I need your phone."

...

"Dr. Merel Jansson?" Mia asked the receptionist at the Amsterdam Genomics Laboratory.

"I'm sorry, but Dr. Jansson isn't available right now."

"Tell her it's Dr. Mia Ward and that it's an emergency."

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "Dr. Jansson is out of the country."

Mia's heart sank. The receptionist started to say something about her returning in a week or two.

"Where did she go?"

"I'm not sure I'm at liberty..."

"Lady, very sick people are going to die if you don't start getting with the program here. Now where is she?"

"India," the receptionist said, defeated. "She's at the Kolkata Medical Research Institute."

"Good, that wasn't so hard, was it?" Mia said before disconnecting. She then used Agent Ramirez's phone to search the hospital's phone number and place the call. The runaround this time was more challenging as Mia struggled with the thick Bengali accent. Finally, Dr. Jansson came on the line.

"Mia?"

"Listen, Merel, I don't have much time. Salzburg is morphing. The 47th chromatid we found is about to get some company."

Mia told her about Anna's work decoding the blast wave and the binary code hidden deep inside of it. It was no surprise that the human genome was composed of 23 pairs of chromosomes (46 chromatids). When Salzburg showed up as the 47th, it was easy to pass it off as a rare genetic anomaly. But that was before the alien ship in the Gulf began somehow spreading it to millions of people around the world. The genes present in that first chromatid had been harmful enough—sensitivity to the sun, weak bones, degraded DNA and in some, like her Zoey, cognitive deterioration followed by the inability to communicate. In other words, it was now starting to look as though the human genome was being altered in ways that would quickly lead to the disappearance of our species. Were these advanced beings clearing out the trash in order to make way for themselves or perhaps a more advanced species of their own creation? It was hard not to think so. And with the cracking of the blast wave's binary signal and the emergence of brand-new symptoms, Mia was growing more and more certain an even deadlier phase of the mutations was about to begin.

"It's strange you should mention that," Jansson said, her crisp Dutch accent shining through. "A handful of our subjects here in India are also showing signs of increased bone density. The treatment of Salzburg has become the research institute's top priority. Since arriving, we've pursued a much more aggressive version of the gene therapy you pioneered back in Amsterdam, given that it showed so much promise before. Still, we wondered whether these new

symptoms were a sign we had pushed too fast and too hard. Whether the patient's body was somehow rejecting our attempts at silencing those four genes within Salzburg."

Mia moved the phone to her other ear as Paul and the FBI agents stood watching with puzzled curiosity. "If we can figure out how Salzburg was introduced into our genome in the first place and how the ship was able to mutate the chromatid remotely, we might learn how to cut it off at the source."

There was more she wanted to tell Jansson. How they needed to figure this out quickly in case the Greenland ice sheet was hiding yet another ship. Not to mention the two-week countdown before a devastating impact sent the human species into the evolutionary dustbin.

"You said 'we,'" Jansson replied, confused.

"I'll be on the next flight," Mia replied, watching the two FBI agents shaking their heads and waving their hands in front of them. But she wasn't worried about them. Informing Jack she wasn't going to be joining them, that was the part she wasn't looking forward to.

Chapter 8

It was 8:50 P.M. and Kay was parked near the Peace Monument on what felt a hell of a lot like a stakeout. She had pulled over in a roundabout and sat eyeing the nearly forty-foot-tall statue as though it might spring a pair of legs and run away. A handful of tourists, mostly Japanese and Eastern European, stood taking pictures of themselves from selfie sticks. Fading hints of late evening light kissed the sky, silhouetting the Capitol Building in the distance. It would be dark soon and the thought of waiting here after sundown sent shivers up her arms.

She had made up her mind earlier to ignore the Laydeezman's instructions, that much was true. But then the memory of Rod Lewis' smoke-charmed voice had echoed in her ear, promising a spot in the newsroom if she could land herself a scoop worthy of the honor. Normally that meant pounding the pavement and beating the proverbial bushes. But the years she'd spent working the lifestyle beat hadn't exactly gotten her much in the way of inside sources. The closest to that was Vincente Ramirez, a former roommate's ex-boyfriend who had gone on to work for the FBI. Not a particularly solid connection, she knew, which explained her presence here, parked near the Peace Monument, waiting for nine o'clock to roll around.

She got out of her car, waiting for a gap in the traffic to cross. That group of tourists was gone. Only she and a young couple remained. They were sitting at the far end, sharing a smooch and a case of the giggles.

Kay removed the printout of her conversation with the Laydeezman and scanned over it.

Grief weeps on history's shoulder.

Two marble figures stood atop the monument's pedestal, both of them women. One covered her face, weeping. The other held a stylus and stared into the corner of the fountain. If the crier was grief, then the other must be history.

Follow history's gaze.

Kay did so and saw little more than the fountain's rippling water. She drew closer, eyeing the area more carefully. That was when she saw the odd shape of something stuck against the fountain's inner wall, half submerged. Taking one final glance to ensure no one was closing in on her from behind, Kay went over and took a closer look.

Sure enough, stuck against that inner wall was a ziplocked bag protecting a light-colored envelope. Her pulse kicked up, drumming a furious beat in her chest as she removed it and hurried back to her car.

She opened the ziplock and removed the envelope. It didn't weigh much more than a few ounces. She tore it open and found a photograph inside. Removing it, Kay switched on the console light and stared for several minutes.

A knock at her window nearly gave her a heart attack. The picture tumbled to her lap as she turned to see who was bearing down on her. The cop outside looked surprised himself.

"You can't park here, lady. You're gonna have to move it along or I'm gonna give you a ticket."

Kay nodded, still clutching her chest. She then started the vehicle and pulled away. It was only after she arrived home to her apartment in Adams Morgan twenty minutes later that she punched the steering wheel, bruising the knuckles on her right hand.

Six months ago she wouldn't have thought twice about heading out after dark, nor would she have been spooked by a cop knocking on her window, but the attack had changed all that. Leaving the paper late one night six months ago, she'd pulled up to a red light when two men got out of the car in front of her waving a gun. She didn't remember much of anything after that, other than she'd woken up the next morning in a park. Her clothes were dirty, as though she'd been dragged through a dusty barn, but she didn't appear to be hurt. To everyone who asked, Kay swore up and down that she was fine. Her car, a beat-up Honda Fit, was never seen again, but the insurance company had acted quickly and gotten her a rental while they worked out the details on a replacement. Carjackings happened more often in the nation's capital than the cops were willing to admit. Which begged the question, if you couldn't prevent violent crimes in D.C., what chance did the rest of the country have?

But it wasn't the loss of her car Kay cared about most, it was the loss of her personal freedom. Since then, any time she pulled up to a red light, her palms started to sweat profusely. She even found herself keeping a few extra feet from the vehicle in front of her in case she needed to swing around for a quick escape.

Still, a life spent preparing for the worst wasn't much of a life at all. Gradually, Kay had found herself inching closer at stop lights. Her parents had taught her from an early age that when you fall down, dust yourself off and keep going. Showing up to the statue had been

one more way of proving to herself that she wasn't going to let the criminals control when and how she lived her life. Hell, no. And yet, the second that cop had knocked on her window, all that progress had vaporized like a puff of smoke from the pipe her father used to smoke. She used to love watching him, the two of them seated on the back step of their humble home, her father letting tendrils waft up past his nostrils before they vanished.

Kay stared down at the slightly swollen knuckle on her right hand and realized that as much progress as she'd made over the last few weeks, there was still a ways to go.

Her nerves a little steadier, Kay fished out the picture she'd retrieved from the fountain and studied what looked like a black image with splotches of light. Soon she began to see this was a picture of outer space and those dots were planets and stars. Then she caught sight of a metallic-looking object near the center of the frame. It was blurry, but clearly triangular. If she didn't know any better, she would swear it looked a lot like the images of that spaceship the Navy found at the bottom of the ocean.

One by one, the pieces began falling into place. The military had told the world the alien craft had fallen into a pocket of subterranean lava and been destroyed. If that was true, then this picture meant they had either lied, or there was another flying around out in space.

Kay pulled out her phone and opened the Facebook app.
Laydeezman was online.

"Where did you get this?" she asked.

The picture was taken five days ago by Voyager One.

"Are you saying there's another one of these things heading for earth?"

Yes.

Kay felt a tingle at the base of her spine. "And the government is keeping it a secret? But why?"

Panic.

"Are we in danger?"

Yes.

This wasn't a joke anymore and Kay could feel beads of sweat now forming along her brow. Then another message arrived.

What I've shown you is but the tip of something much, much bigger.

Kay paused, allowing the magnitude of what he was saying to

settle in. "How big?"

Pulitzer big. Something terrible is about to happen and only a handful of people on the planet know.

"What's going to happen? Can you tell me anything?"

Keep the photos to yourself. Whatever happens, do not leak or try to publish them. If you do, then I will know you cannot be trusted. Soon enough, you will see that I am telling you the truth. Prove to me you are a woman of your word and I will lead you down the rabbit hole.

After that, the messages stopped.

The pain in Kay's hand was all but gone and for the first time in her life, she was stunned into silence.

Chapter 9

Dag charged into the computer room at Joint Base Andrews wearing his biosuit, a rock-climbing harness fitted over his waist. In his hands were a pair of dangerous-looking ice cleats.

“Get a load of these babies,” he said in awe. He slid his hand inside one of them and straight-armed the air before him.

Jack switched the phone to his other ear and stepped away. “What do you mean you’re on a plane to Kolkata? We leave for Greenland in an hour.” The mix of confusion and stinging disappointment was obvious in Jack’s voice.

“There’s something I need you to tell Stark or whoever’s in charge over there. NASA needs to start beaming signals at the incoming ship. Radio signals, lasers, I have no idea how or what it’ll say, but there’s a chance the Ateans might not allow their ship to destroy us if they know the planet is populated by an intelligent race.”

“All right, I’ll tell him.”

“Anna knows part of their language. She might be able to help craft something.”

“I doubt it,” Jack said. “She’s coming with us. And I wish you were too.”

There was a long pause. “When Anna showed us a whole new Salzburg chromatid was about to appear, it left me sickened. Then seeing the changes in Grant and in my daughter, I knew it was already happening.”

“You thinking that Grant and Zoey have the new chromatid?”

“It’s too early to confirm anything at the moment,” she cautioned, “but increased bone and muscle density may very well be part of it. I spoke with Dr. Jansson. She’s in India doing her own research on Salzburg and several of her patients there are showing similar symptoms. When I heard that, I knew that was where I needed to be.”

Jack sighed. “And what about Greenland? I’d like to have your expertise on whatever we find there.”

There was a pause on the other end of the line. “How certain are you that anything’s really there?”

“You heard the president. They’ve already sent a team to set up a habitat and cut a hole through the ice.”

“Listen, Jack, I’m not being a naysayer, but shouldn’t we cover

every available base?”

Jack rubbed the side of his head, an unconscious attempt perhaps to ward away the pain forming at his temples. “Please tell me you aren’t on some mission to save your daughter.”

“I can’t believe you would say that.”

“I’m sorry, that wasn’t how I meant it. I get you’re in a tough spot, just know that each of us has someone suffering from the effects of Salzburg. Consider the billions of other people who need you. I spoke to Gord earlier, the guy who’s looking after my rescue farm. Turns out he fell off a ladder and broke his right arm and two ribs. No clue yet if he had weakened bones like Grant, but he’s out of action and having to brave long lines at the hospital to get medical care. The whole world’s in a big mess that keeps getting worse.”

“Jack, in two weeks that ship will reach us. Every moment is precious. I could have thrown my hands up and opted to spend that time with my daughter instead, hugging her until the fiery end. But I’m not. I’m on a plane to a city I don’t know, following the best chance I see of getting us out of this.”

Now it was Jack’s turn to be quiet. “Maybe you’re right. We can’t be a hundred percent certain what’s waiting for us in Greenland. Maybe nothing’s there but shadows and distortions fooling the equipment.” He held up a printout from the latest scan the advanced team in Greenland had performed less than an hour ago. Within the mess of wavy lines and empty pockets was a single recognizable form nestled beneath the ice. Only the top half was visible, but it looked to Jack a hell of a lot like a triangle. “Every time a new one of these comes in, our confidence gets a little stronger that something is down there. Satellites have already triangulated the blast wave five days ago. It came from that general area.”

“There’s something else you haven’t considered, Jack. If I can find a subject somewhere with the full Salzburg chromosome, and by that I mean all eight genes, then we can sequence them and get that genetic information to Anna. We found a hidden message inside that blast wave. You can be sure there’s one inside Salzburg as well. Haven’t you considered that maybe we could use that information to stop that ship from killing everyone on earth? You may think it’s a long shot, but it’s no longer a shot than where you’re heading. And in regards to choosing between saving my daughter versus the rest of the planet, my question to you is, can’t I do both?”

“I’m sure if anyone can, it’s you,” Jack told her, meaning every word of it. “Stay safe.”

Mia's final words were still ringing in his ears when Admiral Stark appeared, this time sporting a white Navy uniform. Stark was a handsome man somewhere in his mid-fifties, with tightly cropped blond hair and dimples whenever he smiled. He came from a long line of Navy men, going all the way back to the Civil War. That kind of family tree had thick branches and a thicker trunk. The weight of expectation was tremendous and at times nearly crushing. But Stark bore the burden with pride, showing only the slightest signs of strain when he was called on to do anything that might tarnish his long and proud heritage.

Next to Admiral Stark was another Navy man wearing blue cammies. His uniform was impeccably neat, his cap angled perfectly on his head. He had a wide, pale face, his lips drawn into a thin line. He looked about as fun as Ebola.

"This is Captain Rick Mullins. He'll be leading the expedition."

Jack's heart sank. "You're bailing on us too?"

Stark shook his head. "I'll be overseeing the operation from CENTCOM. But don't worry, Jack, you'll be in good hands. Mullins is a consummate professional."

Jack forced a grin that looked far more like a grimace. "Yeah, that's what I'm worried about."

Nodding, Mullins said: "Do exactly as I say and we won't have any problems."

Pompous ass, Jack was thinking but didn't say. Some guys were all about getting in your face on day one and backing off once they respected you. Stark was a case in point. It was only after Jack had basically blackmailed him into letting the science team stay on the rig that the admiral had lifted the heel of his proverbial boot from Jack's sensitive parts.

As Admiral Stark led Captain Mullins away to meet the rest of the team, a young ensign approached.

"Dr. Greer?"

"That's me. Are you joining us as well?"

"No, sir, I have a call for you on the hard line."

"A call?" he asked, puzzled. Who the hell could be calling him here? Surely Mia hadn't changed her mind and decided to fly back to join them. Or could it be the media, eager for an interview before they left? "Did they say who it was?"

"They wouldn't, only that it was very important."

Jack followed the ensign down a long corridor to a room lined with computers on one side and phones on the other. A handful of Navy men and women were inside, speaking to loved ones.

The ensign motioned to a cubicle with a phone and a blinking red light. "They're on line ten."

Still uncertain, Jack took a seat, lifted the receiver and pressed the blinking light.

"This is Dr. Jack Greer."

"Hello, son."

A pause. "Who is this?"

"It's your father, Jack. Ike Greer, your own flesh and blood. Saw you on the news yesterday and did some digging along with a little bribing in order to track you down. Don't be upset. I know this is bad timing, but I couldn't imagine letting the world end without at least saying hello."

"Hello. There. Are we done?"

"Stop being such a hardass. This ain't easy for me either."

"My mother told me you were dead," Jack said, feeling the vein on his forehead beginning to bulge. "I did some digging of my own and found out you weren't dead at all, you were in prison in Texas."

"That's right," Ike said, the tension in the old man's voice easing a little. "Got out last week and been doing what I can to put my ducks in a line, as they say. Imagine my luck getting released and being told the whole kit and caboodle's about to go tits up in less than two weeks." Ike snorted laughter. "And then to find out my only son is as smart as a whip. You know what they say, the apple don't fall far from the tree."

"Well, this one did," Jack said and hung up the phone with enough force to make the chatter in the room fall silent. All eyes turned in his direction as he stood up and stormed out, his right hand clenched into a white-knuckled fist.

Chapter 10

Kolkata, India

Even with the air-conditioning at full tilt, the temperature inside the Ola—India’s answer to Uber—was nearly a hundred degrees. In the front passenger seat sat a rather uncomfortable-looking Agent Ramirez. Sitting to Mia’s left was Agent Chalk, who was busy flipping the toothpick in his mouth end over end, craning his head every so often to see what was holding them up.

“You two shouldn’t have worn suits,” she chided them, not that much could be done about that now.

Ramirez stuck a finger under his collar and pulled his tie loose. Both men were sweating profusely.

They were heading down a major thoroughfare on their way to the Kolkata Research Hospital. But the sights and smells in India were even more intense than what she’d experienced in Kathmandu. The minute you got off the plane, you were assaulted by a humid wave of raw sewage. But the full Indian experience was only getting started. Upon leaving the airport, one was soon travelling along cluttered avenues lined with six- and seven-story tenement buildings. The sidewalks were crammed with masses of human traffic, pushing in every direction, all jostling to make it from shop to shop, each of those brightly-colored with similar-looking signs in shades of yellows, reds and greens.

The roads were even worse. Gridlock in every direction, people on foot or on scooters weaving by. The nonstop honking of horns. It was utter chaos in its purest form, a sight most Westerners had never been exposed to. The only way to fully picture it would be if everyone in America took their cars out on the same day at the same time. Then remove the working street lights and stop signs. Only then could Mia picture a similar scene back home.

The state department had tried to set up a motorcade to escort them, but Mia had refused. It would only have drawn unwanted attention and seeing what they were stuck in, it wouldn’t have made much of a difference.

Chalk stuck his bald, sweaty head between the two front seats. “The hell is going on up there? We haven’t moved an inch in ten minutes.”

Through the mass of vehicles ahead, Mia caught the sight of two men leading a herd of animals across the street. She rubbed her eyes,

wondering if she was dreaming. She pointed. “I think I know why we’ve stopped.”

Ramirez frowned. “What are those things?”

“They are goats,” the driver said, grinning through a thick white beard at the agent’s ignorance. “This is life in Kolkata. Chaotic and yet at the same time beautiful.”

...

Thirty minutes later, they arrived at the research hospital. One of Jansson’s assistants, a young, pleasant-looking Indian woman named Aditi, was there to greet them.

“I see you’ve become acquainted with Kolkata’s infamous congestion,” she said jovially, reaching out to shake each of their hands. “No need to worry, cooler temperatures as well as drinks await you inside.” She looked at Mia. “Dr. Jansson is eagerly awaiting your presence. I will take you to her right away.”

Aditi led Mia through the hospital’s reception area to a bank of elevators. Three floors up, the doors opened into a short corridor, at the end of which was a medical lab filled with technicians.

Dr. Jansson spun and smiled when she saw them enter. She removed the latex gloves she was wearing and set them aside as the two women greeted one another.

“You’ve been hard at work, I see,” Mia said, glancing around at long tables filled with vials, Petri dishes and microscopes. “Your team has also grown.”

Jansson’s own grinning face revealed a woman in her fifties who could have passed for someone ten years younger. And yet in spite of her many fine intellectual and physical qualities, there wasn’t a whiff of arrogance about her. “What you see here is only the tip of the iceberg. I would normally give you a tour and tell you to go easy on your first day, but I’m afraid under the circumstances we need all hands on deck. But come, there are things I think you should see first.”

Jansson led Mia into a tiny windowless room. On the ceiling was a digital projector. She turned it on and flicked off the lights. The wall filled with the image of a full chromosome taken with an electron microscope.

“That’s exactly what we found encoded in the blast wave,” she told Jansson with excitement. “Where did you get this from?” Although that information had likely been passed up the governmental chain of command, Mia was doubtful anyone back home had disseminated the

discovery just yet.

“It came from our patients with Salzburg.”

“What percentage of those patients are showing signs of the full chromosome?” she asked, surprised and frankly a little worried. The genetic changes seemed to be progressing even faster than she had anticipated.

“So far all of them. We’ve run the same tests on domesticated animals and found the exact same structures as well as frequency.”

Mia sat down and scratched her chin. “And yet only thirty percent of the population at large seems to have any form of the new chromosome. Which suggests no new cases are appearing.”

“So far it looks that way,” Jansson replied as she clicked a button on the remote, producing another image. This one showed a transparent artist’s rendering of the full Salzburg chromosome. On the left was the 47th chromatid, replete with the four genes Mia helped to sequence in Amsterdam. First was the gene *COL1*, responsible for weakening bones; then *TRPP2*, which increased sensitivity to the sun; *DAF4*, a gene that accelerated aging; and finally, *SER3*, which affected the frontal lobes, greatly diminishing a subject’s ability to speak or reason.

Jansson clicked again. Now the newest arm of the Salzburg chromosome, the 48th chromatid, appeared. Across from the *COL1* gene was *LRP5*, a different version of the same gene, along what geneticists called an allele. In every chromosome, our genes were arranged along the length of each chromatid. On one side were the alleles we inherited from our mother and on the others the allele we inherited from our father. Which of the two competing genes got expressed depended on which was dominant and which was recessive. Of course, since Salzburg was not an inherited chromosome, and since the genes within it seemed to be appearing one by one, it meant the first four genes that showed up were the ones that got expressed. However, *LRP5*, the gene which coded for denser bone mass, appeared to be dominant, which meant subjects who had previously shown signs of weakened bones would now begin to see the opposite. Throughout the explanation, Mia thought at once of Grant and Zoey, how she had seen both of them experience a significant increase in bone density over the last few days.

“Are you saying the new genes yet to show up will all be dominant?” she asked.

Jansson shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine, though it is certainly looking that way.” The doctor then clicked another button.

This time, it was a feed from a maternity ward security camera.

“What is this?” Mia asked, uncertain.

“These pregnant women all have the full Salzburg chromosome,” Jansson told her.

“You’ve detected abnormalities, haven’t you?”

Jansson tilted her head. “I’m not sure what to call it. To date we’ve studied dozens of pregnant women with Salzburg, each of them with varying levels of health and fitness. What we don’t yet understand is why every one of them is expecting twins.”

Chapter 11

Washington, D.C.

“This place is too expensive,” Kay protested, looking around at the plush leather chairs and the walls liberally covered with hundred-year-old sketches. Restaurant 1789 was one of the priciest in Washington and also one of the stuffiest. Old English aristocracy seemed to be the theme and even the waiters added to the sense you’d somehow been transported back in time. They looked like butlers, but the food was supposed to be terrific and that was one of the reasons Kay’s fiancé, Derek Johnson, had brought her here.

The other was that it was their three-year anniversary. The small bouquet of flowers he had brought was in a vase on the table next to her. In all the time they’d been dating, Derek had never made a single misstep. He didn’t swear or raise his voice. He never forgot their anniversary or her birthday. He was so thoughtful and kind, not to mention successful. His work as an investment banker had led to a series of promotions and raises. It was all rather sickening really. They had planned their wedding for the following spring and yet right about now she wasn’t so sure they would live to see it.

Derek sat across from her, smiling, oblivious to the impending danger. Six-two and well-muscled, Derek balanced his impressive physique with a baby face. With brown eyes and skin the color of café latte, he was a sight to behold.

“Stop being silly,” he said, taking her hand into his. “Your hands are cold. Are you feeling all right?”

“It’s only a chill,” she lied. She was trying hard to focus on the evening, to forget about the pictures Laydeezman had sent her and the disturbing future they foretold.

“I was worried you were gonna miss our anniversary dinner,” he said, a twinkle in his eye.

It took Kay a moment for the comment to register. “Oh, the fashion show in New York. Yeah, I gave it to Sarah. She’s been dying to cover the fashion beat. In exchange I agreed to take her story on the hidden dangers of ergonomic office chairs.”

Derek laughed, his teeth dazzlingly white. “The dangers of ergonomic office chairs. Sounds like a hard-hitting piece.”

Kay squeezed Derek’s hand, her features becoming set. “All joking aside, if I told you something really bad was about to happen, would you agree to run away with me to Vegas and elope?”

Derek's eyes grew wider. "Are you crazy? What would your parents say? Heck, what would *my* parents say?"

"For once, I just wish you could be a little selfish."

Derek's back straightened, the way it always did when he was feeling attacked. "Have I done something wrong?"

Kay shook her head. "No, of course not. You never do anything wrong. You're always thinking of everyone's feelings." Her voice trailed off.

The waiter approached and Derek waved him away. "Give us another minute or two." He turned back to Kay, who was staring at him intently.

"I know that look."

She tilted her head. "What look?"

"That dazed and dreamy look you get when there's something you're dying to tell me."

Kay nibbled at her bottom lip, a terrible habit which tended to crater the inside of her mouth and reveal her true feelings all at once.

"Out with it," Derek demanded, trying to sound tough, but reaching over to brush her cheek with the back of his hand. "Is it about the carjacking? I heard of a guy who was terrified of dogs before he went to a hypnotist. After a single session he went out and bought a Great Dane."

Kay smiled weakly. He was trying to cheer her up. "It isn't the carjacking. I found something out yesterday, something I've sworn not to reveal, and it's eating me up inside."

He leaned forward, concerned. "Spill it. You can trust me."

The phone in Kay's purse pinged and she pulled it out.

"Honey," he protested, an old note of disappointment in his voice. "I wish for once you could just put that thing away."

"This could be really important."

Derek motioned between the two of them. "That might be so, but tonight is our anniversary and to me this is more important."

Kay grunted her agreement, but continued opening her Facebook messenger app.

In one quick motion, Derek snatched it from her hands and set it on the seat next to him.

Kay glared up in disbelief. "Derek Bradley Johnson, you give me

back that phone or I swear..."

He giggled. "If you swear to put it away. For God's sake, Kay. Seems all you do these days is work, work and more work."

She held her hand out, palm up and glared at him. "Phone. Now or I walk." She was bluffing, but he didn't know that.

"Tell me first."

Kay crossed her arms and drew in a deep breath. At the table next to them was an older couple. The skin on their arms hung loosely while their faces looked impossibly taut. "So that alien spaceship that's been plastered all over the news these last few days," she said, keeping her voice low.

"What about it?" Derek asked, handing Kay her phone back. "Was it a hoax? I'll bet that it was."

She shook her head. "I wish it was. Apparently there's another one out in space and it's heading this way."

Derek's complexion grew two shades lighter. "Heading this way?"

"Apparently the government knows and has been keeping it under wraps."

"How long before it gets here?"

"Thirteen days."

"And when it does?" he asked. "What happens then?"

Kay shook her head. "Nobody knows. But you saw the press conference with those scientists. According to them the ship they found on earth not only killed the dinosaurs, but may also be making people sick."

"So you're saying that in less than two weeks we might all be dead?" Derek leaned back in his chair. The couple next to them glanced over, annoyed. "Figure of speech," he offered apologetically. "Enjoy your meal, folks. By the way, I hear the crème brûlée is to die for."

Kay fought back a burst of morose laughter. Here they were discussing the end of the world and Derek was still taking time to put people at ease and recommend desserts.

Whispering now, Derek said: "And how is it you know all this?"

"I have a contact in the White House," she told him.

"White House? Don't you write for the Lifestyle section?"

"At this point I don't care so much about that anymore. My new

contact says he has something much bigger.”

The skepticism on Derek’s face was unmistakable. “Bigger than the extinction of all life on the planet? How do you know this guy isn’t jerking you around? I mean, he could claim the government’s hiding any number of things.”

Just then a ping sounded at the table next to them. The older gentleman reached into his suit jacket and removed his phone and a pair of reading glasses. A moment later another ping rang out from a different table, followed by two more nearby. Kay and the others in this part of the dining room glanced around as pings and pongs fired off from every direction. It seemed the whole world was texting at once. Kay turned back to see Derek scrolling through his own phone, his face a mask of worry. Kay did the same and saw five texts waiting for her. She went to the one from her father first.

Kayza, have you seen the news?

He always used her first name when he was worried or afraid.

Gasps filled the restaurant as she opened the browser window she had set to the *Washington Post* home page. It was a story about the Pope declaring that extraterrestrial beings were welcome in the church. She frowned and flipped to CNN. There in bold black letters was a headline that didn’t surprise her, but one that sent shivers up the back of her arms nevertheless.

“Astronomers detect alien craft on collision course with earth.”

Nearly everyone in the restaurant was messaging friends and loved ones or scrolling through news articles, all with the same dire announcement. Kay knew the low buzz of fear people had been feeling before was about to turn to panic.

Then without warning, ten messages popped up on her phone in the span of a few seconds. One of them came from her Facebook account. She opened the app and saw that Laydeezman had just sent her something.

Now you know I was telling the truth, and I see that you can be trusted, you’re one step closer to getting the exclusive I promised you...

Kay waited. She saw he was typing.

38°88'77.78" 77°04'76.60"

And you may need this: 2028569587

She typed back. “Is that a phone number? I don’t even know what I’m looking for.”

You’ll know it when you see it. You have one hour.

“There’s got to be an easier way to do this.”

This is not a game. It’s for my security. You now have fifty-nine minutes. When the clock reaches zero, it’ll be gone, and I’ll find a reporter more willing to help protect her sources.

“Shit,” Kay blurted out.

Derek glanced up from his phone, fear clouding his dark eyes.
“Maybe you’re right about eloping in Vegas.”

Kay shot up from her seat and grabbed her bag. “Honey, I gotta go.” She got less than five feet away before she ran back, grabbed the flowers and kissed him. “Happy anniversary!” And with that she was gone, her fiancé watching stunned and bewildered as she flew out the door and into the night.

Chapter 12

The massive Boeing C-17 Globemaster III shuddered and Jack clamped down on the squeeze toy in his hand. His jaw was also busy, kneading a wad of gum the way a baker might knead dough. The frantic activity was intended to do more than merely distract his mind from his visceral hatred of flying. It was supposed to keep the painful pressure from pressing against his eardrums. Needless to say, neither the squishy toy nor the gum were doing anything other than tiring him out.

This was the final leg of their journey, first from Joint Base Andrews to St John's, Newfoundland, and from there to an improvised airstrip in the dead center of Greenland.

Seats on the C-17 were arranged along both sides of the fuselage facing inward. That meant any equipment could be loaded and strapped down between the two rows of passengers. Among them were the crates of safety equipment and supplies, not to mention the scientific gear—portable mass spectrometers, DNA sequencers as well as the rows of computer servers tasked with monitoring Anna's status and providing her access to external sources of knowledge.

The military transport plane shook again and Gabby put a gentle hand over Jack's. He turned to her, chomping away. Gabby held out her hand.

“Hand it over.” She was talking about the gum. “I can see it isn’t doing you an ounce of good and it’s been driving me nuts for the last hour.”

Jack laughed and plucked it out of his mouth, massaging his tired jaw muscles in the process.

“We land in less than thirty minutes,” she told him, leaning her head back and closing her eyes. “Try to rest.”

“Easy for you to say.”

She cocked one eye, glaring at him. “If this is about Mia, try not to let Grant hear you. He may not be a full-blown geneticist, but we don’t need him feeling like Monday’s leftovers.”

“Grant’s got nothing to worry about,” Jack said. “And Admiral Stark assured us they have an experienced team of scientists already in place to assist us.”

“It’s your old man who got to you.” She had an uncanny way of being able to read Jack’s mind.

He nodded and then shook his head. “Said he saw me at the press conference and wanted to patch things up while we still...well, you know.”

“While you still had the chance,” Gabby said. Her gaze peeled away, lost for a moment in her own tangled thoughts. “We all have things we’d like to set straight before the end,” she finally said. “It’s hard to blame him.”

“I don’t blame him for seeking resolution. I just don’t have the headspace to be worrying about crap like that.”

A deep crease formed on Gabby’s brow. “You’re not the only one with a Mack truck pressing down on your shoulders, Dr. Jack Greer.”

“That’s not what I mean. In all these years, he’s never reached out before. Then he sees me on TV and suddenly feels the burning need to reconnect.”

“You think he’s being opportunistic. Jumping on the bandwagon because he thinks his son is famous.”

Jack rubbed his hand along the leg of his pants. “Maybe part of me is worried that he means it.”

“If you ask me,” Gabby told him, “I think you’re scared witless you’re more like your old man than you care to admit.”

Jack didn’t reply to that one. He was busy trying to wash down the sudden bad taste in his mouth.

Through a gap in the equipment, Jack watched Anna on the other side of the plane. She was seated next to Grant and the two of them appeared to be engaged in rather heated debate. Jack watched for several minutes. He couldn’t make out what they were discussing. All he could see were arms in the air and expressions of frustration.

“I’ve been meaning to discuss something with you,” a voice called out from his right. It was Rajesh and he had a concerned look on his face.

“Is it about Anna?” Jack said, returning to the show on the other side of the plane.

“I’m afraid it is. Before leaving, we ran a final diagnostic and detected a rather strange anomaly in the program running her cognitive abilities.”

“Those *Jersey Shore* reruns are making her dumber, aren’t they?”

The stale quality of Rajesh’s smile told Jack it was best he not make light of the situation.

“Please tell me those Sentinel goons haven’t managed to infect her with another virus.”

“No, nothing like that. Given Anna’s desire to become more human, I suppose it’s a wonder her efforts to expand her own general intelligence would not have gotten there sooner. You see, during our analysis we discovered an algorithm she had written herself, designed to replicate the full range of human emotions.”

“But I’ve seen her express sadness at being scolded or happiness when Mia and I returned from meeting with the president.”

“Yes, and those are genuine and healthy feelings she is experiencing.” Rajesh held Jack’s gaze. “But there is a whole other spectrum within this new algorithm that might be problematic.”

“Are you talking about anger and violence?” Jack asked, concerned.

“No, nothing that extreme, although we will shut her down if she ever becomes dangerous to those around her.”

“Why don’t you just go in and remove the algorithm?”

Rajesh shook his head. “I’m afraid it’s become far too ingrained in the rest of the progress she has made. Removing it would mean carving out a huge chunk of her existing abilities. In other words, it would be like giving her a lobotomy.”

Jack crossed his arms. “So Anna is no longer a young girl of ten.”

“No,” Rajesh said, continuing the thought. “I would say she is closer to a teenager now.”

“They grow up so quickly,” Jack said, hiding his concern. He couldn’t imagine having to shut Anna down, or worse yet, disconnect her permanently. With any luck this was only a phase she was going through, one traversed by himself and billions of others over the course of humanity’s time on earth. But even at her accelerated rate of development, he wasn’t sure she’d live to see her twenties.

Jack felt the plane bank to the left. A moment later, Captain Mullins returned from the cockpit.

“Is everything all right?” Jack inquired, fighting the sudden urge to work the squishy toy in his hand.

Mullins stopped and braced himself against the bulkhead above Jack’s seat. “Should be fine. We’re circling over the airstrip just waiting for an okay to land.”

Jack caught the subtle flash of fear in the captain’s eyes. “Something’s wrong, isn’t it? Are we low on fuel?”

Gabby slapped his leg. “Will you stop being so paranoid?”

“We have more than enough to circle for another twenty minutes, if that’s what you’re worried about,” Mullins said rather curtly before stomping away.

“There’s something about that guy I don’t like,” Jack said, watching the captain make his way toward the back of the plane.

“There’s no law against being a jerk,” Gabby told him.

Jack nodded. “No, there isn’t. I just hope to hell Admiral Stark vetted this guy better than the fake ONI crew that tried to kill us.”

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Ten minutes later the C-17 shook violently as it touched down on a runway made of ice and snow. The engines reversed thrust, slowing the huge aircraft. With no windows, it was difficult to tell whether or not they were taxiing or standing still. The voice of the pilot came over the intercom, calling Captain Mullins to the cockpit. Mullins undid his seatbelt and stood. So too did Jack, his legs feeling wobbly from sitting for so long. He made his way to the front of the plane, steadying himself against the bulkhead with his left hand and the stowed equipment with his right. Both he and Mullins reached the pilot at the same time.

“Dr. Greer, please return to your seat,” Captain Mullins ordered him.

“Back off, we have a right to know what’s going on,” Jack shot back. He turned to the pilot, a grey-haired man named Steve Peters, who removed his sunglasses and folded them into the breast pocket of his aviator jumpsuit.

“When we failed to reach anyone to confirm our landing I wondered if there was a problem with the equipment on the ground. Then we tried another channel and all we got was static.”

Mullins’ expression hardly changed. He ducked down and peered out through the cockpit windows at the extensive cold-weather habitat. Jack did the same. By any definition, Northern Star was an impressive sight to behold. Three brightly colored modules connected to a central core. It resembled the spokes of a giant wheel. Each module sat on a pair of hydraulic stilts, raised several meters up from the snow-covered ground. But apart from the structure itself and a handful of smaller huts and support vehicles, there wasn’t a soul in sight.

“Where is everyone?” Jack asked. “Shouldn’t this place be bustling with activity?”

The copilot removed her helmet. She was a thin young woman with dark hair and a calming demeanor named Natalie Thomson. She pushed the earpiece to her ear as she continued to radio Northern Star. "Still nothing."

"Well, we can't sit here all day long," Jack said. "For all we know they're having the same radio problems we are."

"We should follow protocol," Mullins said sternly. "We don't disembark until we get the all clear."

"And what if it never comes? Are we to sit here on the runway until we freeze to death? At the very least, a few of us should investigate to make sure everything is all right." Jack fixed Mullins in his sights. "Unless you know something is off."

Mullins looked offended. "I know what you're insinuating and I don't like it one bit. I'm following regulations and maybe you should too."

"Listen, Captain, I shouldn't be the one to have to tell you that we don't have the luxury of waiting around for a green light on this. That flying extinction machine isn't going to wait till we get a green light. We may only get one shot at stopping this thing. We screw this up, we won't get a second chance."

"Okay, fine. A few of us will head out and figure out what's going on. Everyone else will stay here and wait for the okay." Mullins clapped a hand on Jack's chest. "There may be a big pile of shit to eat for breaking the rules. I hope you're hungry."

Ten minutes later, Captain Mullins, Jack, Dag and Gabby donned their biosuits, modified for cold weather. The suit itself was already rated for temperatures around zero, but warming coils sewn into the fabric increased that to minus forty. Given the air would be breathable, they opted to leave their helmets behind.

Dag and the others donned their OHMD (optical head-mounted display) glasses that had served them so well during the exploration of the alien craft.

"Testing, one, two, three," the lanky red-bearded Swede said. His voice came through filled with static.

"Whatever's causing this interference is making it hard to hear you," Jack told him. "Let's use hand signals and keep the talking to a minimum."

"I'm in charge of this mission," Captain Mullins reminded Jack. "And I'll be the one giving orders."

They were about to leave when Anna appeared. “Captain Mullins, would you mind if I joined you?”

The captain looked uncomfortable. “Not a chance,” he said to her. Then to the others, “The tin can’s only gonna slow us down.”

“She isn’t a tin can,” Gabby corrected him. “Her name is Anna and if you gave her half a chance, you may just be surprised what she can do.”

Anna smiled. “Thank you, Gabby, for your kind w—”

“All right,” Mullins barked, feeding a magazine into his M4 rifle. “You want that thing along, you look after it.”

“Thing?” Anna said with a touch of annoyance as the C-17’s loadmaster opened the front hatch and lowered the folding stairwell into a gust of frigid, unforgiving wind.

Chapter 13

Mia couldn't erase the eerie image of the maternity ward Jansson had shown her. How it had been filled with pregnant women afflicted with Salzburg, all of them expecting twins. If there was any doubt before, it was about as clear now as the glass beaker in her hand that Salzburg was on the move. And yet the exact mechanism by which the blast wave had been altering the DNA of so many species on earth was still unknown. Clearly, it represented a technology many years ahead of anything humans possessed. Academic as it might seem, it was a question Mia knew was central to articulating a strategy to slow and perhaps even reverse the damage that had already been done. But reaching that goal first meant understanding how Salzburg was able to sneak into our DNA in the first place.

There was a time when the average human genome consisted of 23 pairs of chromosomes. Now that number had been bumped up to 24. According to Alan Salzburg, it was a process which had only been discovered a few years ago, but one they'd retroactively traced back to the mid-90s.

Mia deposited the beaker and activated the DNA sequencer. While she was figuring out how to tackle the problem at hand, she might as well get the genetic ingredients that made up the newly discovered LRP5 gene.

They knew the blast wave from the ship hadn't caused Salzburg to appear. That had happened before. However, it was clear that the waves emanating from the ship were affecting the Salzburg already inside of people. That meant it had to have been introduced in another way.

Watching the lights on the sequencer flash on and off reminded Mia of the time she'd spent on the ship and how those Sentinel agents had posed as naval intelligence officers. She knew from Admiral Stark's testimony that they must have had someone on the inside. Someone, or perhaps a group of folks, high up enough to get them the certification they needed to usher them through the multiple layers of security around the mission in the Gulf. She was in the middle of daydreaming about how powerful that person would need to be—the secretary of state? Or maybe even the vice-president?—when she was struck by what could only be described as an epiphany.

Maybe Sentinel wasn't alone in having people on the inside. What if Salzburg had also used a form of sleeper agent as well? Something planted in our DNA from the beginning, waiting patiently for the right

time or perhaps the right signal to begin introducing Salzburg into our genetic makeup?

But what would such a thing look like? Would it have been a length of DNA? Her eyebrows arched quite on their own. Or could it possibly have been a gene? If so, it would have been a gene common to each of the species already affected. There were dozens of affected species of animal that had either been domesticated by humans or lived near them. Luckily, most of them had a genome that had been fairly well documented in the last twenty years.

Mia asked one of the young technicians to pull up that data along with a list of the genes that were common to all of the species on the list.

It was less than an hour later that the technician returned with five stapled sheets.

“Here is what you asked for.”

Mia thanked her and went to the projection room to have a quiet place to have a look. She was looking for a gene that scientists knew next to nothing about, or possibly one with no obvious function or purpose. Most of that time she spent scratching off genes that didn’t match. The vast majority were well understood and performed important jobs in the organisms they resided in. Before long she came upon one gene called *HISR* that displayed a particularly interesting set of characteristics. It coded for a non-essential protein which helped speed up membrane production. As per the search parameters she had given the technician, the gene was also present in each of the species she had outlined. But it was a final data point Mia found which stopped her cold. The *HISR* gene had been rendered obsolete in about seventy percent of the animal and human population by “loss-of-function” mutations. That meant small changes to the genes over time had rendered these genes dormant in around seventy percent of the species population who had it. Which was to say, only thirty percent of any group had active versions of *HISR*, a number that just so happened to be the same percentage afflicted by Salzburg.

Before leaping out of her chair with joy, Mia asked for the sequenced genome of anyone with Salzburg who was part of the Kolkata study. Once again, the information took some time to arrive. But after poring over it, one thing became clear. Individuals with the dormant version of *HISR* showed no signs of Salzburg while those with the active version now possessed a genome with a full extra chromosome.

What did this mean? Mia was in the middle of asking herself when

Jansson stormed into the room.

“I heard you found something,” she said, practically panting.

“*HISR* isn’t merely a useless remnant from our ancestral past,” Mia started to explain. “It’s an assembler gene, one that’s been waiting for eons to perform its one and only purpose, creating Salzburg.”

“But from what?” Jansson said, both amazement and skepticism in her voice. “New chromosomes and genes don’t simply pop into existence out of nowhere.”

Mia met her gaze and held it. “I believe it’s using our non-coding DNA, what some still erroneously refer to as junk DNA, as the building blocks.”

Jansson held the edge of the table to stabilize herself. “That’s incredible. But why now? What triggered *HISR* to become active?”

“I’m not sure,” Mia told her. “But I have an idea how to find out.”

Chapter 14

Washington, D.C.

The GPS coordinates Kay got at the restaurant led her to the Korean War Veterans Memorial in West Potomac Park. Dedicated in 1995, the main feature was a triangular strip of land with a platoon of nineteen stainless-steel soldiers.

She stood for a moment, biting at her lip, watching the statues silhouetted against the darkened sky. Strolling through the park at night wasn't exactly the smartest thing for a woman to be doing, but the promise of a big story had overwhelmed the nagging little voice in her head. Thankfully, a handful of couples were milling about, including a family of four. One of the children dragged his feet, whimpering.

Laydeezman had told her she would know it when she saw it and here she was standing before the memorial without seeing much of anything. She decided to circle around the display, checking the surroundings for anything unusual. Like the grounds themselves, the soldiers were also arranged in a tactical wedge formation. Kay moved clockwise, circling around to the left of the soldier out front and scanning left and right as she went. She looked at her phone and saw less than ten minutes remained before the deadline. She had reached the rear of the formation when something caught her eye. One of the statues was carrying an unusual piece of equipment. In the dark it almost looked natural, but something about the shape of it stuck out. It was a black bag. Kay stepped over the chain fence and drew nearer. She was less than five feet away by the time she realized she was looking at a black laptop bag. Bingo!

•••

Not long after, she had returned to Biltmore Street and the one-room apartment in the Adams Morgan part of town she called home. Her cat Goggles—so named after the circular patches of dark fur covering his eyes—greeted her at the door with an onslaught of recriminating meows.

"I know I'm late," she told her persnickety roommate, moving into the living room and setting the laptop bag down. "You should have food in your bowl."

Goggles stared as she spoke, then meowed.

Kay sat on the couch next to the laptop and tapped her leg. "Get over here, you stubborn little bugger."

After playing hard to get, Goggles leapt up, rubbing the sides of his face against Kay. Soon the little beast was curled next to her and Kay carefully removed the laptop and flipped open the top. There wasn't a power cord inside the bag. She pressed the power button and to her surprise the machine hummed to life. It had barely gotten started when the computer asked for a password.

Kay frowned. It was just her luck to get this far only to be stopped dead by something so small. She pulled out her phone and was about to message Laydeezman when she remembered something. Hadn't he included a string of numbers in his message to her? She had assumed it was some kind of phone number, but maybe she'd been wrong. Scrolling up, she found what she was looking for.

2028569587

Kay inputted the numbers and clicked enter. A spinning disc appeared briefly before the desktop appeared.

So far, so good.

Not only was she in, but getting in with the password also confirmed she'd left West Potomac Park with the right item.

The desktop displayed a single icon. It looked like a video file. Kay clicked it.

A black and white video began to play. Five men sat in what looked like a boardroom. The strange downward angle of the shot gave Kay the distinct impression the group had been filmed secretly. But even without color or close-ups, Kay was able to easily identify who she was seeing. They were among the most powerful men in the country. Vice-President John Millard, Speaker of the House Julia Lopez, President of the Senate William Jackson Jr., Secretary of State Robert Chase and Secretary of the Treasury Ellen Hall.

There was audio too. She listened with bated breath.

“He’s already started moving the departments of agriculture and energy underground,” Lopez said, tapping on the table with the pads of her fingers.

“I heard Treasury’s set to go next,” Hall told them with disgust. “There aren’t enough bunkers in the whole country for more than a few thousand, not to mention our family members. I’m telling you he’s dead wrong on this one.”

“The prospect of living underground for the next few decades while the earth cools isn’t my idea of fun,” Jackson said, shaking his head and leaning back in his seat. “John, did you try convincing him to hit that thing with every nuke we had?”

"Till I was blue in the face," Millard replied. "President Taylor's already given up. He's convinced nuking it won't do any good. And he's certain a nuclear strike will start an interplanetary war we could never hope to win. Thinks if we go down that road they won't stop till every last one of us has been exterminated. And that if we go underground and wait out the worst of it, at least some of us might still be around to rebuild and repopulate the planet."

After that the room erupted. It was clear to Kay the president was hoping to weather the incoming impact, rather than risk a move that might lead to the eradication of our species. To the men gathered around this table, however, such a move was tantamount to giving up. If the human race was going to die, let them do it fighting, rather than hiding in a hole like rats. Kay found herself ping-ponging back and forth between each of the positions. They both had merit and yet at the same time, both options were terrible.

As Kay listened to them argue, a single thought kept running through her mind: What about the rest of us? If the president was already sending critical governmental bodies down into bunkers, would the rest of the American people, the rest of the world be left to die? A large-scale effort to save seven billion lives would take years, even decades, assuming it was even possible. A measly two weeks wouldn't be nearly long enough. Clearly it was a shitty situation with a short list of shitty solutions.

"Taylor's a lost cause," Chase told them. "He's already made up his mind. Man's left us no choice. The line of succession is very clear, ladies and gentlemen. Once he's gone, Millard will slide into the job. Least then we'll have a fighting chance."

After that the video ended.

Kay's mouth was dry from the shock of what she had just witnessed. This wasn't merely a bunch of angry government bureaucrats venting their frustration. This was proof of a massive conspiracy involving the president's own cabinet. A conspiracy to have him assassinated and replaced by his vice-president.

The ping from Kay's phone startled her. She shifted to remove it from her pocket, annoying Goggles, who was busy cleaning his ears. The Laydeezman had sent her a message.

Have you watched it?

"Where did you get this?"

I can't say. But I hope now you can understand my paranoia.

"The president's life is in danger," she wrote, her fingers feeling

numb against her phone's touch screen.

Not if you can publish the story first.

"What do you mean? Shouldn't you just contact the authorities?

Don't be naïve. The highest levels are in on it. However, once the conspiracy is exposed to the public, the authorities will have no option but to move in. There's a folder on the laptop with still images. Close-ups of each of the conspirators. That way they won't be able to claim it isn't them. But it needs to get out as soon as possible, otherwise President Taylor, along with the rest of us, will end up dead.

Chapter 15

The blast of cold air bit the exposed skin on Jack's face as he exited the plane, his boots crunching over tightly compacted ice and snow. They were on a wide-open Arctic plain, the wind whipping along at incredible speeds. As if to prove the point, the American flag flying atop Northern Star rippled violently. Fifty yards away lay the four cold-weather modules that made up the base. Three massive blue structures connected to an even larger red one in the center.

As they pushed through the blinding snow, Captain Mullins pointed to the blue module on the far right. "That's M2, the engineering module," he shouted over the wind. "We'll go in through there."

They pressed forward, leaning into the powerful gale. Jack had been part of three Arctic expeditions in the past and each time the habitat was normally a flurry of activity, especially when a transport touched down. Scanning around, Jack still couldn't see a soul. There might very well be a simple explanation for the eerie silence, but the strange feeling roiling his insides wasn't going away.

Soon, they reached the engineering module and climbed the circular set of stairs outside. Mullins peered in through the glass porthole before unlatching and pulling open the heavy door. Jack held it until everyone was inside. When the door was sealed shut behind them, he radioed the C-17.

"We're inside."

The static-filled reply from Peters, the plane's pilot, came back a moment later. "Roger that."

The interior was spacious and modern, with corrugated steel floors, the walls made from a hardened plastic composite. Running the length of the engineering module was a long corridor with rooms on either side. The only light bled into the hallway from large circular windows in each chamber.

Mullins, his rifle in the ready position, ducked into a room on the right, while Jack and Gabby went left. Décor-wise, white and varying shades of blue seemed to be the dominant motif, which made the red Jack saw splattered against the wall stand out in stark contrast. He flicked a switch on the wall and nothing happened. The crumpled form of a man in a military uniform lay in the far corner. "Captain," Jack called out. "We got a body." Gabby stood frozen, her hand covering her mouth.

In a beat, Mullins was at the door, leading with the tactical light he'd fixed to the end of his rifle. He centered the beam over the body of a clean-shaven male sentry. The young man couldn't have been older than nineteen or twenty, but the holes in his chest and head meant none of that mattered anymore. The fingers of his right hand were still curled around the grip of his holstered pistol. Mullins moved forward and took a closer look.

"This is a tight grouping," he said, inspecting the wounds. "Poor bastard didn't have a chance." He carefully removed the soldier's hand from the pistol's grip and handed the weapon to Jack. "I sure hope you know how to use one of these."

"I grew up in Houston," Jack told him, accepting the pistol and pulling back the slide far enough to chamber a round. "Guns are baked into our DNA." He informed Peters of the situation and told the rest of the crew to hang tight and report any movement they spotted outside.

Anna stepped into the room, a light glowing from her chest as she stared intently at the body. She had seen death before, although only briefly following the melee with the Sentinel agents on the ship. Surely, Anna would have questions, Jack knew, but those would have to wait. It was starting to look as though Sentinel hadn't been dismantled nearly as much as they thought it had.

"What about me?" Dag asked, heavy threads of fear in his voice. "Don't I get a gun?" His thick red beard looked dark in the low light.

"Looks like this is all we got," Jack told him. "Whoever did this may still be here, so let's stay close."

They exited the room with the dead soldier, Mullins in front, Jack close behind, followed by the others.

One by one they cleared each of the rooms as they made their way down the corridor. When they reached the generator room, it became clear someone had switched off the power. With some effort, they got it going again. At least now, heat would begin flowing back through the old girl's bones and maybe they could get a distress call out to CENTCOM.

Jack pushed into the electronics lab. The room was roughly twenty by thirty with tables hugging every wall. Shelves hung above them filled with anything and everything an electronics junkie would kill for. Watching Anna's face, it was as though she'd come home. She reached down and scooped up what looked like a small pizza box with rotor blades. A broad smile filled her face.

"This is no time to play," Jack told her.

Anna glanced over, frowning. “Of course, Dr. Greer. I believe this is a drone,” she told him.

“Maybe it is.” He began to wave her out of the room. “Let’s stick together.”

“I was thinking, Dr. Greer, if this drone is operational, we might be able to explore the other modules without exposing ourselves to danger.”

Jack paused and considered Anna’s suggestion. “That isn’t a terrible idea,” he told her. They had already cleared this part of the facility. Soon they would be making their way to the central social module and beyond. “How long will it take you to get it working?”

“I cannot say. I will work as quickly as I can.”

Jack nodded and was about to step from the room when Anna said: “Please be careful, Dr. Greer.”

•••

The others had moved onto the computer lab when Jack pushed ahead into comms. He inched slowly into the room, cutting the angle whenever he could to limit his exposure. “Anyone in here?” he asked, his voice echoing back at him. He turned a corner and saw a figure slumped over a desk wearing a headset. Jack flicked on the light and wished he hadn’t. A gaping hole in the back of his head told him everything he needed to know. Two more bodies wearing military uniforms were sprawled over a couch.

Whoever had done this had swept through the advance team like a scythe, wiping them out one by one. Given the surprise on the faces of the dead he’d seen so far, it was logical to assume they’d been using silencers and ambushing small groups of scientists and soldiers. He had expected to find a base bustling with activity. Instead they had found a tomb.

Jack leaned in to check the bodies on the couch when a pair of frantic eyes snapped open. He jumped back in fright. It was a woman and she drew in a deep, ragged breath.

Chapter 16

Horrified, Mia and a dozen lab technicians had paused their work to watch the battle raging on the streets below. The throngs of cars, tuk-tuks, motorbikes and shoppers were gone. In their place was a mob of hundreds, if not thousands of protesters, pushing against a wall of Kolkata riot police armed with only long wooden clubs. The crowd was shouting and chanting in anger.

“Can you make out what they’re saying?” Mia asked Jansson’s assistant Aditi, all the while trying to stamp down the sense of fear growing within her.

“It sounds as though they’re upset the government has set up curfews,” Aditi said, her large brown eyes betraying her own deep sense of unease. “It must have something to do with news of the alien ship heading to earth. People are afraid and instead of reassuring them, the government has chosen to institute draconian laws. They will never learn.”

The police were in the process of using water cannons on the protesters when Agents Ramirez and Chalk entered the lab. “It isn’t safe to stay here anymore,” Ramirez told her.

Suddenly the lights in the hospital flickered, as if to prove the agent’s point.

Mia motioned outside. “And you think it’s safer out there?”

“No, but we’re working on an extraction plan,” Chalk informed her. For the first time, she noticed the white earpiece he was wearing.

The lights flickered once again and the technician next to her crossed her arms. “We shouldn’t lose power. We’re on the hospital grid.”

That might be, Mia thought, but what about the rest of the city? India didn’t exactly have a temperate climate. If the grid went down, there was no telling how many people would die from heatstroke alone. She turned to the two FBI agents. “I need more time,” she told them.

Chalk ran a nervous hand over his taut scalp and glared at the mounting chaos outside. “We’re gonna do what we can to keep this mob from smashing its way inside, but if we fail, you’re coming with us whether you like it or not.” He brushed his suit jacket aside, revealing a small twenty-caliber semi-automatic pistol. Chalk removed it, checked that the safety was on and handed it to Mia. “Can you use

one of these?"

She thought of Ollie and nearly let out a sardonic burst of laughter. What felt like a very long time ago, he too had once asked her that same question. She took the pistol and pulled back the slide. "I can take care of myself just fine," she informed them in as nice a way as she could. She certainly had her own set of scars to prove it, she thought, sliding the pistol into the side pocket of her cargo pants and retreating further to the back of the lab. Or at least as far as she could get from the windows and the sounds of the civil strife below. The truth was, they didn't have time for all of this, not when so much was counting on her unraveling the mystery behind Salzburg. Taking a deep breath, Mia tried to settle her mind by going back to the summers she'd spent as a young girl camping with her family in the Blue Ridge Mountains. The smell of hot dogs roasting over an open flame. Sitting around the camp fire while her father told ghost stories.

Slowly, Mia's focus began to return. She had identified what she believed was a gene responsible for assembling bits of non-coding DNA into the genes that made up Salzburg. Already three technicians had been tasked with comparing short lengths of Salzburg's genome to that found in the pile of DNA once erroneously labeled junk. While she waited for the results of that study to come back, Mia busied herself with tracking down what might have caused the assembler gene to spring into action in the first place. Often gene mutations were caused by environmental factors. Could the same have been true for waking *HISR* in the thirty percent of the population where it hadn't been rendered useless?

Without warning, Jansson appeared next to her. "I don't know how you can work with everything that's going on outside." Her eyes darted around as though she were a caged animal. The woman looked more than uneasy. Mia stood up and gave her a hug. Jansson froze, her arms hanging awkwardly in the air, probably not entirely sure what to make of the gesture.

"There are some things that are beyond our control," Mia told her, distinctly aware of the pistol in her pants pocket, but just as hopeful she wouldn't have to use it. "Right now the sand is passing through the hourglass. Normally to a scientist, time is our friend—it helps us ensure our data is accurate by studying results over a long period of time—but that isn't a luxury we have at the moment. One way or another, this pressure cooker is gonna pop its lid and I wanna get as many answers as we can before it does." She gripped Jansson by her shoulders. "Maybe you could help me with what I'm doing."

Jansson nodded absently. "What is it you need?"

"Right now we've only identified a single gene in the new 48th chromatid," Mia told her. "I'm pretty sure if we can find someone, anyone with all four genes we suspect are out there, then we may finally be able to map the full chromosome."

"What do you suspect that will tell us?" Jansson asked, folding her arms as a fresh wave of angry shouts rose up from the streets below.

"Tell us?" Mia repeated. "Maybe not much, but if the beings who went to all the trouble of inserting Salzburg into us have any message they wanted to deliver, I'm convinced that's where we'll find it."

Jansson smiled, nodded and started to leave before she stopped.
"Thank you for that."

Mia returned the gesture. "Don't thank me yet."

Returning to her goal of identifying Salzburg's origins, Mia used one of the computers to identify areas in the world where Salzburg was most prevalent. After inputting the parameters, tiny red dots began to appear on the map, each representing a known patient with the disorder. Soon the individual dots gave way to red clumps, the largest centered in North America, Brazil, Argentina, India, China and South Africa. Since the earliest cases of Salzburg could be traced back to the mid-nineties, Mia knew that figuring out what had activated *HISR* would mean first finding out what was going on in those countries at the time. To aid in her search, Mia overlaid a series of random results, letting the computer sort through the closest matches. Pollution spikes, nuclear waste facilities, changes in the earth's magnetic field. After nearly forty-five minutes, the computer found a match.

Mia flipped back and forth. The outbreaks of Salzburg and this new data point matched perfectly, although she was at a loss to explain the connection. Her eyes traced over the words on the screen for the tenth time. Genetically modified organisms.

The first genetically modified plant was created in 1983. About a decade later, GMOs would go into commercial use and from there go on to change food production around the world. It would also stir up bucketloads of controversy and debate. Although this certainly wouldn't help, Mia was quite certain the blame for Salzburg did not lie at the feet of the GMO industry. Regardless, one thing was clear: the assembler gene *HISR*, planted within the DNA of most if not all of the species on earth, had been programmed to remain dormant, waiting for the emergence of GMOs in order to begin transforming the genetic makeup of the planet. Were the Ateans trying to somehow improve us, replace us or wipe us from the earth? Mia suspected the

time was fast approaching when she would get her answer, although something else told her she might not like that answer when it came.

Chapter 17

Greenland

Until the science module, designated M3, was cleared, and they gained access to the medical ward, the computer lab would have to make do as a temporary clinic. Gabby was with Jack, helping him remove the dead soldier they had found draped over the wounded engineer. They laid her on the couch, her green army fatigues stained with blood. None of them were medics and it was difficult to tell whether the blood was hers or from the individual who had been lying on top of her. The nametag on her uniform said Tamura. She was Japanese American, somewhere in her late twenties with bronzed skin and fine features. She was also tall, five-eight, and athletic.

Gabby undid the top half of her uniform, searching for a wound. As she attempted to peel part of the fabric from Tamura's right shoulder, the woman groaned with pain.

"I see a bullet wound," Gabby said. "Looks like it entered right above the collarbone"—she slid her hand down the back of the white t-shirt Tamura was wearing—"and exited next to her shoulder blade."

Jack opened drawers in search of something to help stem the bleeding. He found a roll of brown paper towel and brought it over. Gabby bunched up two wads and pressed them against both sides of the wound.

Jack stood, shaking his head in disbelief. The name plate on the deceased soldier they'd removed from the couch read McGraw. His wounds looked very similar to Tamura's. It wasn't long before Jack was able to imagine how the scene might have played out. The soldier sitting at the desk was likely shot first. Reacting on instinct, Tamura and McGraw had leapt from the couch to engage their attackers, only to be fired upon and left for dead.

Jack knelt down next to her. "Do you feel pain anywhere else?" he asked, scanning her legs and torso for concentrations of blood.

"He saved me," Tamura whispered, her eyes shifting over to McGraw. "I hate to see him on the floor like that."

"I do too," Jack assured her. "But right now we're short on free hands and security. Can you tell us what happened?"

Tamura swallowed. "I'm thirsty."

Gabby glared at him. "Why don't we save the questions for later?"

A noise from inside a utility closet a few feet away caught Jack's attention. He spun in time to see the door fly open and a man wearing a heavy parka leap out at him. He reached for his weapon only to find it wasn't there. But his attacker was armed and raised the weapon, shouting something in a language Jack didn't understand. Five shots rang out before the man crumpled to the floor, a pool of blood spreading around him.

Smoke trickled from the barrel of the pistol in Tamura's hand. A second later, she went limp. Jack caught the gun and readied it as he checked the rest of the room.

"What's going on?" Mullins shouted over the staticy radio.
"Everyone okay?"

"We're fine," Jack reassured him, "but we may have just found one of the people responsible for the attack on Northern Star." He went over and took the dead guy's gun, searching him for any form of identification and finding none.

From the hallway came a buzzing sound. Jack grabbed the pistol he'd laid on the desk and readied himself for a fresh assault, all his senses on high alert.

The noise grew louder as something flew into the room and came to an abrupt stop. The object moved left and then right before darting away and down the other end of the corridor.

"The hell was that?" Gabby asked, rising to her feet.

Jack sighed, wiping a hand across his forehead. "Anna's new flying friend." He had chalked up Anna's delight in working on the drone to a child's tendency to want to play during the least opportune moments. Throughout his life, he'd seen it time and again, in church, during important speeches, and now after discovering the entire advance team had been slaughtered.

As it turned out, using a drone to scout the rest of the facility was an excellent idea. It would take a fraction of the time and reduce their exposure if any of the assassins were still here.

His eyes found Tamura, who was still regarding him, although faintly.

"I owe you one," he said.

She smiled. "Bet your ass you do."

Clearly, Sentinel or some other organization was trying to stop them from reaching whatever lay beneath the ice sheet. They had to know the United States and her allies would make them pay for what

they had done. Unless, Jack wondered, retribution didn't matter. Perhaps whoever had done this had waited for the advance team to complete their work, from setting up the base camp to drilling the hole and installing the deep mineshaft elevator equipment. Jack caught his fingers rubbing in that slow circle that signaled his mind was fast at work. Maybe this wasn't about dissuading them or controlling the Northern Star. Maybe it was all about getting there first.

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Once the entire habitat had been cleared, the rest of the team along with the pilot, co-pilot and loadmaster met in the central module. It was by far the largest with three floors containing a comfortable galley, dining area, rec room and library. They assembled in the dining area, since it had plenty of seating. As of now, there were twelve of them, including Tamura, who had been relocated to a bed in the medical wing.

Apart from a soldier in the sleeping module who had died in Dag's arms, she was the only survivor. The normally jovial paleontologist sat by himself, slouched over one of the tables, his bearded chin perched over his crossed arms.

The Swede wasn't the only one feeling dispirited by what they'd arrived to find. Every one of them was experiencing a range of emotions from sadness to rage at what had been done here. In all they had discovered the bodies of nineteen military and ten civilians. Located between the science and central modules was an outdoor observation deck. That was where they took the bodies, mainly to ensure they would be kept frozen without attracting polar bears or other scavengers.

Captain Mullins stood before those gathered in the dining area and offered a few words. "At this point, I think our best course of action is to take off in the C-17 and hunker down at a local airstrip until reinforcements arrive to secure the facility."

"No can do," Steve, the pilot, informed him. "That plane's not going anywhere without a refill."

Mullins motioned out one of the large third-story windows to the giant fuel drums outside. "Can't you taxi over and fill it up over there?"

The loadmaster cleared his throat. "Whoever hit this place also drove a forklift into each of the drums, draining them bone-dry."

"What about a distress signal?" Mullins asked Steve. "Any luck reaching CENTCOM?"

The pilot shook his head. “Still nothing but static. We tried the sat phone and even that’s not working.”

Jack studied Mullins’ expression. The captain wasn’t exactly showing the sort of concern Jack would have expected.

Anna raised her arm. “I believe the signals are being jammed,” she told them. “I might be able to locate the source and disable it.”

The flesh on Eugene’s face bore a greenish hue. “So how long again before they send a rescue party?”

“Once we get through, it could take anywhere from twelve to twenty-four hours,” Mullins informed them.

“That’s way too long,” Jack shot back. About thirty yards east of Northern Star was the lift system the military engineers had built. The main elevator car was no longer on the surface, which meant the chances were good the people who’d done this were already down below.

“I’m afraid given the circumstances we don’t have much choice but to wait,” Mullins replied, sternly.

Jack turned to Anna. “Have you had a chance to go over any of the seismic data the advanced team collected before the attack?”

“I was able to access the facility’s servers, yes. The ice sheet at our present location has a depth of one point eight five miles. I have attempted to clean up the data by running it through a number of filters, although regrettably I was not able to improve the quality very much.”

“Was there anything you were able to make out?”

Anna paused, her digital features looking pensive. “I hesitate to say, Dr. Greer, but if you are asking me to guess, I did observe a large object in the shape of a pyramid.”

“It must be another ship,” Grant said, jumping to a perfectly logical conclusion.

“I am not certain about that, Dr. Holland,” Anna said. “The images contained several additional anomalous features I was unable to identify.”

“The people who did this are down there,” Jack said, his index finger pressing against the table. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but hanging around here waiting for the cavalry to show up isn’t exactly gonna cut it.”

Mullins planted his hands on his hips. “Protocol stipulates we are to sit tight until reinforcements arrive.”

“Hell, for all we know another group of assassins is on their way to finish us off,” Eugene stammered.

“Jack and Eugene do have a point,” Gabby offered, playing the voice of reason. “I don’t want to even consider what might happen if the cold-blooded killers who murdered nearly everyone here get their hands on whatever’s hidden under this ice sheet.”

Jack rose to his feet. “This is more than Sentinel pilfering exotic technology. I’m going down there. If any of you care to join me, you’re more than welcome. Besides, I for one am yearning for a little payback.”

Beads of sweat formed on Captain Mullins’ brow. He scanned the room, taking the temperature of who was with Jack and who wasn’t. He addressed Chris Perkins, the loadmaster, a burly guy built like a linebacker and with the dexterity of a UFC fighter. “Think you can get our equipment off the C-17?”

“With a little help, I should be fine,” Chris said. “So long as someone can operate the forklift those assholes used to puncture the fuel drums.”

Natalie Thomson, the co-pilot, snapped her fingers. “Today’s your lucky day. In another life, I used to drive a forklift at Sam’s Club.”

“Things are starting to look up then, aren’t they?” Grant said, his elbows resting on the table, his long fingers steepled beneath his chin.

Mullins looked at Dag. “In that case, you and I will collect weapons and ammo.”

“In the meantime,” Anna announced, “I will work on locating the signal jammers.” She looked at Jack. “Dr. Greer, if you would like to see hard copies of the seismic data, I have sent two to be printed in the computer lab.”

“Thank you, Anna.” Jack turned to Gabby. “Any chance you could check on Tamura? When we head down, we likely need to take everyone with us.”

“Everyone?” Mullins repeated, clearly concerned with dragging along a wounded team member.

Gabby shrugged. “It’s fair to say anyone left behind won’t stand a chance if the facility gets attacked again.”

Mullins sighed, his hands scrunched into tight fists. It was clear to Jack the captain despised whenever things didn’t go exactly as he’d anticipated. But even within the military there was an old saying: no plan survives the first shot. Within the next hour, they would be

descending beneath more than a mile of ice. By then Jack would know if he had made the right call in heading down or doomed them all to certain death.

Chapter 18

For the third time in ten minutes, a frantic Kay dialed Ron Lewis, the newsroom editor, only to get his voicemail. She checked her phone. It was eleven pm. She knew from talk around the office Ron wasn't exactly a night owl. While his beat reporters were cranking out words late into the night, Ron was rumored to be catching up on his beauty sleep. That left her with two options. Wait until tomorrow morning or drive over to Ron's place and wake him up.

She knew where he lived, a beautiful row house in Georgetown. He and his wife had thrown a party for the newsroom last Christmas and her friend Terry Bridges, who covered Washington politics, had brought her along as a guest.

Kay stared down at the couch, where Goggles was licking his paw and using it to flick his ear. He paused briefly and glared up at her, as if to say, *What's up?*

"What should I do?" she asked him. Getting fired wasn't her main concern, nor did she really care at this point about winning a Pulitzer. Clearly none of that mattered if the world was about to end. Every news station had been running the story in a giant loop since it broke. But letting the president's cabinet conspire to assassinate him so they could greenlight a nuke strike against the alien ship heading for earth was not something she could just sit on. For all anyone knew, the E.T.s were intending to land on the White House lawn and offer humanity the secrets of the universe. Either way, taking down a sitting president was flat wrong and Kay intended to do whatever she could to stop it.

Goggles meowed, glaring at her before returning to his grooming.

"I knew you'd agree," she said and cupped his tiny white head and kissed him. Goggles pulled free and licked his displaced fur back into place. With that, Kay scooped up the laptop and headed for the door.

Ten minutes later she pulled up before Ron's house and killed the engine. Her immediate boss, Lifestyle editor Trish Han, was going to have a major coronary about what Kay was about to do, but she'd never spent much time worrying what Trish would or wouldn't like. Which explained why going to Trish's office for a thorough dressing-down had become something of a regular affair.

Kay exited the car and jogged up a short flight of steps to the front door of his brownstone and began knocking. By the fourth knock, she detected movement in the house. Then she heard a voice call out from

behind the door.

“Who is it?”

“It’s Kay Mahoro,” she told him, breathless. “I’ve been trying to reach you all night.”

“Kay, surely it can wait until the morning.”

“I’m sorry, but there isn’t a chance in hell this can wait.”

Ron undid three locks and opened the door no more than a crack. “I like enthusiasm just as much as the next editor, but showing up at my house in the middle of the night is totally inappropriate.” Balding with tufts of grey hair and a saggy chin, Ron looked about ten years older than he was. The man’s crankiness hung over him like a prickly blanket.

She swung the laptop bag around and tapped it with the palm of her hand. “You may change your mind once you see this.”

Ducking his head away for a moment, Ron lit a pipe and pulled open the door. “You’ve got five minutes to impress me before I call Trish and have her fire you.”

“If you’re not impressed, I’ll be happy to quit.”

He laughed at that, a raspy and painful-looking endeavor. He paused briefly in the hallway and angled his torso to complete a rather fierce-sounding hacking session. The ferocity of the act forced him to flex his toes against the black and white tiles beneath his feet. Eager to avert her eyes, Kay studied the exquisite wood trimmings around the entryway. The outside was gorgeous, the inside was on another level.

He brought her to his study. A large desk overflowed with papers, books and magazines. Plush leather chairs stood one on either side of the desk. Hugging the walls were a series of bookshelves, filled to the brim. More books were stacked on the floor. He motioned for her to sit, removing a pile of papers from the seat.

“Out with it,” he said, drawing on his pipe and releasing a pleasant puff of smoke.

Kay removed the laptop, turned it on and spun it around. “Double-click the video icon.”

He did and sat watching it, his eyes narrowed. On several occasions he grunted.

Then finally he asked her: “Where’d you get this?”

“A White House contact,” she replied coyly.

“That sounds vague. What does this source of yours do?”

“To be honest, I’m not sure.”

Ron’s considerable brow knit together. “You have a contact and you don’t know who it is?”

She shook her head. “He only just started reaching out.”

Ron shook his head with displeasure. He hated anything that could come back and bite the paper in the ass. “Of course, if true, this video is one of the biggest political conspiracies since Watergate. The rules in Lifestyle may be a little different, but in the news division, if the paper hangs its hat on something this big, and the guy turns out to be some nutjob, then the *Washington Post* pretty much bought the farm. You get me?”

Kay crossed her arms. “And how much will any of that matter in thirteen days from now? You heard them. Once the president is out of the way and the VP takes over, they plan to declare war on an alien race infinitely more powerful than we are.”

Ron removed his pipe and rubbed at the side of his face.
“Obviously you saw the news tonight.”

“Who didn’t? It’s everywhere. And here’s the crazy part. I knew about it beforehand.”

“You what?”

“My source sent me on a treasure hunt for the very same pictures that are all over the news right now. Told me there was more to come if I kept it to myself and he knew he could trust me.”

“Yes, and meanwhile every other news outlet in the country is running with it, all except us, and you could have changed that.”

Kay shook her head in frustration. “I took a chance. He promised me a bigger fish and I think it was worth it. But now you’re saying you don’t wanna run the story in case it isn’t true. But consider this. What if it is true?”

He stared at her, his eyes burning brightly. “If you’re so sure about this guy, then bring it to the cops. Now get out.”

“Ron,” Kay pleaded, her hands out before her.

“Go!” he shouted.

Dejected, Kay took the laptop and made her way out of Ron’s house and back to the car. She sat for a moment, her finger hovering over the ignition switch. If Ron Lewis was too much of a pussy to run the story, maybe an editor from another paper might be willing to

give it a shot. But with time ticking away, her mind kept returning to the last thing he had told her, about bringing it to the cops. She trusted her source, and he had proven himself worthy of that trust. Still, Ron might have had a point. Maybe it was worth hitting this from both ends. She would inform the authorities and publish the story with a different paper.

Kay scrolled through her phone contacts until she landed on Vincente Ramirez. He had dated her old roommate back in the day while training for the FBI. She clicked on his name and listened as a strange ring began to sound. The kind of ring that signaled he wasn't in the country.

"Ramirez," he answered.

"Hey, it's Kay Mahoro."

"Kay?"

"Heather's roommate."

"Oh, yes, I remember. Listen, Kay, I'm out of the country on assignment. Things are pretty crazy here right now. Let me call you when I'm back in the States."

She frowned. He probably thought she was angling to ask him out or something. "Don't hang up. I've been working on a story for the *Post* and a source close to the president just sent me video evidence of a conspiracy to have him assassinated."

Ramirez grew quiet. "Assassination? If you're sure about your source you should call the FBI's head office."

"That's the thing. The people involved are some of the most powerful figures in the country. I'm worried it might be suppressed. Can I send it to you and have you forward it to someone at the bureau that you trust?"

Another pause. "Yeah, sure, of course. You just caught me off guard."

"Where are you?" she asked.

"Kolkata," he told her. "On security detail for one of the scientists who went inside that spaceship they found. We got rioters outside and she doesn't want to leave just yet."

"Dr. Mia Ward?" Kay asked, feeling the air escape from her lungs all at once.

"Yeah, and I'll tell you, I can't wait until I'm back in the US."

"I'm compressing the files and sending them to you now." Just

then Kay's phone flashed Ron Lewis' number. "Listen, I gotta go, but stay in touch and stay safe." She released Ramirez and switched over to Ron. "Kay here."

"I've been thinking about what you told me and I've decided we should run with the story."

A surge of elation ran through her body. "You have?"

"It's far too late to make tomorrow's paper, but we can put it online, make it front-page news. But only if you think you can bang it out before sunrise. Otherwise I can hand it off to Bev Schneider, she's a..."

"Forget Bev, I can do it," Kay practically screamed. "And don't worry, you'll have your story. I'll stay up all night if I have to."

"That's what I like to hear," Ron said and hung up.

Kay sat in her silver Corolla, her chest heaving, her armpits drenched. This was the chance she'd been waiting for. A chance to set wheels in motion that might save more than a single life. It could save an entire planet. So why couldn't she shake the uneasy feeling in the pit of her belly?

Chapter 19

Kolkata

“This is incredible,” Jansson said, leaning over the desk in the cramped confines of the projection room. She leafed through the documents Mia had printed, outlining the connection between GMOs and Salzburg. Mia considered their next steps, fully aware that only meters away all hell was breaking loose in the streets.

Chalk had come by moments before to inform both women that the situation outside was growing more violent and that the barricades holding back the crowd weren’t going to last much longer. Already, several storefronts along Diamond Harbour Road had been vandalized. It was starting to look as though the authority’s use of tear gas and water hoses was only aggravating the situation.

Mia had been prepared to leave at a moment’s notice, although she had no clear idea what kind of escape route her two FBI handlers had in mind. She still held out hope that the masses below would eventually grow tired and disperse all on their own. She understood the very legitimate fear they were feeling. The news that Armageddon might be fast approaching from the dark depths of space was difficult to wrap one’s head around. And to think that it wasn’t an icy rock flung off from the asteroid belt, but rather a death machine sent by an alien species. A week ago, the notion of life existing outside our planet was enough to earn snickers and tinfoil hats. Today, it was propelling people onto the streets, demanding some sort of response from governments impotent to counter the threat.

In the hours after news of the incoming ship had been announced, India’s stock market, the National Stock Exchange, had suffered a complete meltdown with trading suspended indefinitely. Moments later, banks had banned all withdrawals over six hundred rupees (one hundred U.S. dollars). And Mia was certain it wouldn’t be long before the same thing began to happen back home.

“Mia?” Jansson said gently, touching the geneticist’s elbow.

Mia blinked and turned to her. Her colleague was wearing a backpack and sneakers, clearly ready to flee at the first sign of imminent danger. “I’ve gone over the data three times,” Mia said. “If you see a flaw I’m happy to revisit and check again.”

Jansson shook her head. “I see no flaws. I’m quite shocked, to be honest with you. Genes aren’t supposed to act like carpenters, cobbling together cabins out of driftwood. *HISR* is acting more like a nanobot dressed up to look like a gene.”

“You might very well be on to something,” Mia admitted. “Although given the circumstances, I don’t see us getting to the bottom of that particular question here and now.”

“No,” Jansson said reflectively. “Which of course leads us to the other major mystery.”

“Why GMOs?” Mia replied, seeing where her Dutch friend was heading.

“Exactly,” Jansson said, placing her hands on the back of the chair before her. “Why not steam power, nuclear fusion or any other manmade invention?”

“It’s a benchmark,” Mia said, thinking out loud. “The ability to create genetically modified organisms. To assemble life. To play God.”

Jansson held up the data Mia had collected. “If this is true—if the *HISR* gene was planted inside organisms on earth and set on sentry duty while it sat waiting for the age of genetic engineering—well, I’m sorry to say, I find that incredibly creepy.”

“You think that means they’re actively monitoring us?” Mia asked, her eyes narrowing.

“My guess is they’ve been watching the planet for millions of years, waiting for those Plesiadapiformes specimens you found on the ship to grow up and become us. And now, seeing that creation is consumed by war and strife, they’ve decided to wipe us out.”

“The other possibility,” Mia offered, “is that they don’t even know we exist.”

“I would find that hard to believe,” Jansson said. “Why go to all the trouble of seeding the planet with life only to destroy it? Doesn’t make sense.”

“Who says any of it has to make sense? Just look what they did to the dinosaurs. Besides, I shouldn’t be mentioning this, but there’s been talk of using nuclear missiles to blow the ship up before it reaches us.”

Jansson crossed her arms. “Do you think that could work?”

“Maybe in the movies, it might. Given the object’s speed, I think it’s liable to do more harm than good.”

“That doesn’t leave us with many options, besides living underground or moving to Mars.”

Mia shook her head. “Jack’s gonna try to have the people at NASA beam messages at the ship informing them that there are people down here.”

“Assuming, that is, they give one whit about the indigenous life on

earth.”

“We can only hope they do.”

“But how will you send a message they’ll understand?” Jansson asked. “And what radio frequency do they communicate on?”

“That’s the problem,” Mia admitted. “We have a basic sketch of their language. Maybe that’s where SETI comes in. They’ve spent billions of dollars on those telescopes. Maybe it’s time we put them to good use.”

Both women smiled, forgetting for a moment about the world outside.

“Or maybe that’s where Salzburg comes in,” Mia proposed halfheartedly.

Jansson looked genuinely intrigued. “Really? How so?”

“Well, I have a hunch that frequency you mentioned might be listed somewhere inside Salzburg’s genome. All we need to do is find a patient with all eight Salzburg genes and feed the genomic information into a supercomputer I happen to be friends with.”

“Wow, aren’t you lucky.” The sound of Jansson’s laughter was cut short by an explosion that rocked the building. This time, the lights did go out and for good. Mia charged out of the projection room and into the sound of screams from the corridor. Hearing it chilled the blood in her veins. In an instant, Mia understood exactly what was happening. The mob had broken in and they were trapped.

Chapter 20

Greenland

The feed from the drone showed it slowly approaching the twenty-foot hole bored through the ice. The winds, which had been fierce when they landed, had died down to around ten miles per hour, making flying the four-rotor device a far more manageable affair.

Quickly they came upon the lift, which straddled the opening with a triangular formation of metallic struts. A series of thick cables led from an engine room nearby to a series of wheels and pulleys at the top of the metallic support structure. What they had hoped to find at the end of those cables was a large circular cage that would have allowed them to descend the nearly two-mile distance through the ice. But the cage wasn't there. Whoever had taken out the advanced team must have already used it to make their own descent.

The team sat huddled around the computer screen, watching the drone draw closer.

"Signal strength at one hundred percent," Anna told them, referring to the link she had with the drone. "Dr. Greer, do you wish for me to proceed?"

He glanced at Gabby, who had her arms crossed tightly over her chest. She caught his eye and nodded. "I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to see what we're getting ourselves into."

"Proceed," Jack said.

Dag leaned in, his beard next to Jack's shoulder. They were all wearing their biosuits, fully geared up to head down as soon as they got a handle on what, if anything, was down there.

Without any noticeable movement, Anna expertly maneuvered the drone over the opening, careful to avoid the cable running down the center. In one swift motion, she rotated it into a ninety-degree angle and swung toward the cable until the two touched. An electronically controlled, metallic latch Anna had fitted to the base of the drone then secured the flying device to the cable. Another order from Anna tilted the top two rotors so that they were now horizontal.

"The hell is she doing?" Dag asked, baffled by the display.

A wide grin spread across Grant's ruddy face. "Something quite ingenious, actually."

Anna cut power to the rotors and the drone plummeted through

the hole, clinging to the cable like a special forces soldier fast-roping from a helicopter. A wall of emerald greens and azure blues whizzed by as the drone descended.

“Five hundred meters,” Anna told them. None of this information was appearing on the screen, but was being relayed directly to her.

The colors changed slightly as the drone fell further away from the sun’s rays. Before long the colors dulled.

“One thousand meters,” Anna said.

It was darker now and she switched on the drone’s lights.

When it reached two thousand meters, it exited the bottom of the hole and entered a truly enormous ice cavity. Jack snatched the inconclusive seismic survey they had found in the science lab and studied the vague outline of the chamber. He held the printout up to the light of the window next to him and tilted the image on its side. “Seems to go on for miles in every direction,” he said, impressed.

“Could it be that whatever’s down there has been melting the ice around it?” Gabby speculated.

“If the bottom of this cavern is flooded,” Grant said, twitching one of his bushy eyebrows, “then your hypothesis may be correct. But if it’s still frozen, then perhaps whatever’s down there didn’t melt the ice, but prevented it from forming in the first place.”

The image on the computer screen began to stutter. “Signal strength is at forty-two percent,” Anna warned them.

“Detach from the cable,” Jack told her.

Anna turned to him. “Are you certain, Dr. Greer? The connection is already down to thirty-nine percent. I may lose Aphrodite.”

“Aphrodite?” Dag repeated in surprise.

Jack grit his teeth. “You may have fixed that drone up with a few fancy modifications, Anna, but unlike you, it’s only a machine. Now do as I say and disconnect.”

Anna looked at him a moment longer, blinking. “As you wish, Dr. Greer. Separation engaged.”

The rear rotors began to spin, slowing the drone’s descent as the metal latch came undone. A second later the rotors transitioned and it flew away from the cable at high speed, righting itself in the process. Captain Mullins stared at the laptop feed, mesmerized. Even from this height, the drone’s lights cast deep shadows against the strange shapes undulating below.

They could see scattered mounds of ice and what looked like rock. Still, there was something unnatural about what they were seeing.

"Bring her lower," Jack said, crossing his arms and bending slightly at the waist.

"Signal strength at twenty-five percent," Anna informed him. Although her tone was neutral, Jack could feel the subtle barbs all the same.

They were about a hundred feet from the surface when Gabby let out a gasp.

"What's wrong?" Dag asked, clutching his chest.

"Those shapes..." she stammered, struggling to get the words out, clearly struggling to process what she was seeing. "I think they're structures."

The screen broke up with a burst of static.

"What do you mean, structures?" Jack shot back. They'd come here to find an alien ship, not a long-lost archeological site. Thinking quickly, Jack spoke to Anna. "Take a few snapshots, would you?"

"Understood," she replied. The screen began to populate with a series of grainy stills, many of them distorted by waves of static. Then all at once, the link went dead.

"Oh, crap!" Gabby shouted. "Did we lose it?"

"You can get it back, can't you?" Eugene asked.

For a moment, all of them stared at the now darkened laptop screen, silently wishing the drone back to life. None perhaps more than Anna.

"Signal strength is at zero percent," she lamented. "Aphrodite is not responding."

"I'm sure you can make another," Dag said, patting her back with a noticeable clank.

Anna's eyes remained downcast. "Certainly I can, but I worry none will be as magnificent."

Gabby caught Jack's gaze and threw him an inquisitive look. *What's up with her?* that look said.

Jack shrugged in response.

"Anna, can you get those images cleaned up?" Jack asked her.

She remained silent.

"Anna, Dr. Greer is talking to you," Rajesh scolded her.

“Give her a minute,” Gabby told him. “Losing something you love isn’t easy, even if it is only a drone. Maybe we just need to give her some time.”

Precisely what they didn’t have, Jack thought but didn’t say.

A crackle of static sounded from the desk behind them. “Looks like the radios are back up and running,” the pilot told them. “We’re in the process of apprising CENTCOM of the situation.”

Mullins marched over and scooped up the walkie. “Roger that.” He spun on his heels and speared Eugene with an intense stare. “What are you doing right now?”

Eugene pointed at himself. “Me?” His eyes were three times their normal size. He looked like a kid caught chewing gum in math class.

“You’re gonna come with me to recall the elevator.”

Eugene looked outside, seeming to contemplate the cold, blowing snow that had kicked back up in the last few minutes. The theoretical physicist’s lack of enthusiasm was hard to miss. “Isn’t Dag better suited to...”

“But first,” Captain Mullins said, cutting off Eugene’s weak rebuttal, “we pass by the armory and get some firepower.”

The smile that flashed across Eugene’s face lit up the room. Any previous objections to helping Mullins quickly dissolved. Suddenly, Eugene didn’t seem to mind the bone-chilling cold outside.

As much as Jack didn’t want a guy like Eugene packing heat, he knew what awaited them below would be far more dangerous than a bunch of mysterious structures. There was a team of trained killers who would stop at nothing to get what they had come for.

•••

About thirty minutes later, Jack found Rajesh in the computer lab. He glanced out the large round window and saw two figures—the taller one in front—struggling against the heavy winds and driving snow.

“We’ll need to get down there soon,” Jack said, noticing Rajesh wasn’t wearing his biosuit. It lay sprawled over the seat next to him. The engineer seemed completely preoccupied.

“No problem.”

“I was actually coming to see if you knew where Anna was.”

Rajesh peeled away from the monitor he’d been staring at. “Still locked away in the electronics lab, I imagine.”

Jack was struck by a flash of deep concern. “What do you mean locked?”

“I mean I tried getting in and she would not open the door. Her emotional protocols are spiking.” He pointed to a graph he had onscreen to prove his point.

For Jack, there was only one thing he needed to know. “Is she fit to join us or not?”

Rajesh met his hard gaze. “At this point, I cannot say.”

Jack left at once, heading for the electronics lab. He passed Gabby along the way and she joined him once she found out where he was going.

As soon as they arrived, Jack went for the door and found it locked. He tapped gently. “Anna, are you in there?”

A handful of seconds passed without a response.

“Anna...”

“I am, Dr. Greer.”

“I’d like you to open the door, Anna.”

He could hear noise coming from inside the room.

“Anna, I’m not going to ask you again.” Even Jack couldn’t help marveling at the absurdity. Here he was on a mission of perhaps the highest importance and one of the most vital members of the team was sulking. He had little to no experience with teenagers, but Jack could only imagine there were so many more people better suited to dealing with a situation like this. What he wouldn’t give to have a school counselor on hand.

Just then the latch clicked and the door swung open. Anna was on the other side of the room, digital face glowing back at him. Her expression looked dour. Or was she preoccupied?

“How’d you open that door?” he asked. “I didn’t hear you cross the room.”

“Remotely, Dr. Greer,” she explained, as though the feat had been no big deal. “This entire facility operates off of an encrypted wireless network. It was merely a case of bypassing the network authentication. I am now able to monitor all functionality associated with Northern Star’s operation.”

“Which includes locking and unlocking doors,” Gabby said, more than a touch of concern in her voice.

“That is correct,” Anna replied, going back to the worktable. “As

well as opening and closing doors, hatches, life support and surveillance systems.”

“Surveillance?” Jack said. He was suddenly struck by an idea. Perhaps there was footage of the attack. If so, it might give them a better idea of what happened and how many attackers they might be up against. By Tamura’s own account, she believed the hit squad had been composed of at least a half-dozen operatives.

“Yes, there are several cameras, Dr. Greer. They cover each entrance to the facility, the corridors, communal areas and science and technology labs. I’ve reviewed the footage available, but unfortunately, it appears to have been interrupted before the attack.”

For the first time since entering the room, Jack became conscious that the lab was in a state of total disarray. Every table was filled with tools, wires and a mishmash of parts. “What exactly is going on here?” he asked sternly. “I thought you were cleaning up the fuzzy images from the drone.”

Anna motioned to the table next to the door. “The images you asked for are there,” she said, pointing a robotic digit. “Unfortunately, I was not able to improve the clarity due to the low resolution of Aphrodite’s cameras.”

Gabby went over and picked them up, leafing through them one at a time. “Jack, I think you better see these.” She handed them over as he approached.

He held the first at arm’s reach, another miraculous benefit of being in his forties. Seemed your eyes were always the first things to go, followed closely by your hips and knees. Maybe if he was lucky, DARPA might whip him up some new ones like they had for Anna.

As his sight adjusted to the blotches of light and darkness, he began to see why Gabby had called him over. In the distance he spotted a structure that dwarfed nearly everything around it. Even with distortions still present, there was no doubt whatever it was, this thing had a triangular shape.

“It’s got to be five hundred feet high,” Gabby said, amazed.

“The extraterrestrial ship we found off the coast of Mexico was twenty-five hundred feet high,” Jack said. “And from what I can see, this isn’t metallic at all, but possibly made of stone.”

“Based on the distance from the object,” Anna added, “I suspect Dr. Bishop’s assessment of the object’s height is very close. In fact, it is just shy of five hundred feet in height and seven hundred and fifty feet along each side of the base. As a point of interest, I should note those

are strikingly similar dimensions to the Great Pyramid in Egypt.”

“Six days ago, satellites detected a blast wave from this area,” Jack said, struggling to reconcile what all of this meant. He rubbed his thumb and forefinger until he saw Gabby frown at his funny little habit.

Anna made the finishing touches on whatever she’d been working on and put it aside with several other very similar-looking hunks of plastic.

“Care to fill us in on what you’re doing?” he asked her, snapping out of his reverie.

“I would be happier to show you, Dr. Greer. You and Dr. Bishop will need to back up.” With her palms out, she pushed against empty air. “Just a little bit more. That should be sufficient.

“When I lost connection with Aphrodite,” Anna began to explain, “I was overcome with an incredibly dense stream of data. Much of it had no grounding in logic. It is difficult to explain, I am afraid, even for me. Although I am capable of processing nearly an infinite number of information packets at once, I could not help but feel overwhelmed.” She blinked, looking up at both of them. “I do not expect what I am telling you to make much sense.”

“It’s called sadness,” Jack told her. “And it can overwhelm us no matter how smart we think we are.”

“Dr. Viswanathan outfitted me with neural transmitters, designed to draw attention to areas of my mechanical structure at risk of failure. The data stream was very similar to when one of my joints fails to articulate.”

Gabby’s face glowed with the warm smile of a mother. “Yes, that’s what we call pain.”

Anna’s eyes flitted to the ceiling in contemplation. “Is it habitual for these two sensations to be connected?”

“Feelings of loss and pain?” Jack said, rubbing the scruff on his chin. “More than you know.” His glance shifted over to the table. “So how about that display?”

“Oh, yes.” Anna moved to the corner of the room opposite them. “I call them my flying circus.” Without warning, the room filled with the sharp whine of over a dozen motors buzzing to life. Then the table itself seemed to come alive as those hunks of plastic Anna had been working on, each no bigger than a paperback novel, began to rise and then hover five feet in the air. The aerial acrobatics began a second later as the tiny drones danced around one another, navigating the

narrow space of the lab in a ballet that left both Jack and Gabby speechless. First they swept around doing figure eights, followed by a handful of other geometric shapes before she had them mimic the motion of the planets in the solar system. Jack watched Anna's eyes as she directed their movement remotely. When they were done, the drones each settled back on the table.

"That's one hell of a flying circus," Jack said, clapping. Gabby was just as impressed.

"There is still more work to be done," Anna admitted, beaming. "But for now they look most promising indeed." The expression of sheer joy on Anna's face said it all. She wasn't a liability. In a way, she was no different from them, thrown into a dangerous and frightening situation and forced to deal with an onslaught of emotions powerful enough to floor the average person.

The radio on Jack's belt garbled to life. "Jack, are you there?" It was Captain Mullins.

"I am. Go ahead."

"The elevator's topside. Gather your team and your gear. We head down in ten."

Chapter 21

Kolkata

“We need to leave right now,” Jansson called out from the lab, her voice ringing with panic. A handful of researchers and lab assistants hid under desks or behind large pieces of equipment. Nobody knew what to do or where to go.

Mia was in the projection room next door, downloading the work they’d done on *HISR* and Salzburg’s link to GMOs onto a USB key. Her heart was booming in her chest as she watched the progress bar taking forever. Faint shouts and screams rose up from somewhere down the hall. The transfer was at seventy-five percent complete when Mia heard a series of ragged footsteps enter the lab.

“Are you Dr. Mia Ward?” the male voice asked. He sounded Indian.

“No,” Jansson replied. The slap that followed echoed through the lab. Then came the sound of Jansson squealing and falling to the floor.

The muscles in Mia’s body tensed with fear. Next door, those huddled in the lab cried out in terror. They were about to be slaughtered like chicks trapped in a coop. She glanced down at the progress bar and swore. Eighty-six percent. She removed the pistol from her side pocket and held it loosely in her hand. She stepped into the lab.

“Someone looking for Dr. Ward?” she asked. There was a dangerous edge to her voice. Like a woman who had nothing to lose. Part of her was hoping the FBI agents assigned to protect her would come charging through that door guns blazing, but there was no telling what had happened to them.

The two men searching through those hiding in the room stopped what they were doing. The brawny one, his hair tied back in a ponytail, stood by the door. The other headed toward her. He was thinner than his friend, but he had the eyes of a killer. As he moved in, a scuffle broke out near the door. Both of them turned to see what was going on. Two men were fighting—the brawny Indian thug and... was that Ramirez? Mia jerked the pistol into the air and followed the tall guy as he ran back to help his friend.

If there had been a back door, Mia might have grabbed Jansson and as many others as she could and fled. But the only way out lay through the doorway where three men were currently fighting. The tall one pulled a pistol of his own and the man attacking them kicked

it out of his hands. All three were exchanging a series of furious blows.

Then she heard the white guy shout, “Get stuffed, you wankers.” And for a second, Mia stood, blinking with confusion, the gun poised in her hand. “Ollie?”

Just then the brawny one sent a fist into Ollie’s gut, doubling him over. He then threw him to the floor. But with a half spin, Ollie managed to land on his back. It hardly seemed to matter as the two assailants were right on top of him.

In five quick strides, Mia crossed the lab. The two on top were starting to rain blows down on Ollie. Mia pressed the muzzle to the first man’s head and fired. His body immediately went limp and collapsed. She then swiveled to the other, who looked up just in time to see a flash before he too fell back dead.

Mia lowered the gun slightly, aiming it now at Ollie’s battered face. His left eye was swollen and a trail of blood ran from his nose and the corner of his mouth. Her index finger hovered over the trigger.

“Go ahead, lass,” he said, staring back at her intently. “I deserve it for what I did to you. I will say before you kill me, you sure did learn your way around a gun since I’ve been gone.”

A few feet away, Jansson sat up, rubbing the side of her head. A handful of lab assistants hurried over to help her. A bloodcurdling scream raced up the hallway, a quick reminder that the danger was far from over.

Ollie grabbed the pistols the men were carrying and wiped the blood from his lip with the sleeve of his shirt.

“What about Ramirez and Chalk?” Mia asked, no one in particular.

“If you’re talking about those two FBI blokes,” Ollie said, “I don’t think they made it.”

A pang of sadness settled over Mia’s heart. Soon enough, the guilt would come. But there wasn’t time for any of that now. They needed to get far away from here.

She slid the pistol into the pocket of her cargo pants, held out her hand and recited a line from Ollie’s favorite movie. “Come with me if you want to live.”

Chapter 22

Washington

Kay came awake with a start. In her dream, she'd been salsa-dancing at a sweltering club in Miami with her fiancé Derek. Even now, awake and rubbing at her tired eyes, she could still hear that same Latin beat repeating ad nauseam. But this wasn't a case of dreams bleeding into reality, she realized, listening to her phone belt out its Latin ringtone. No, this had been reality intruding into her dreams.

The ring died out a second before she could answer it. As she plugged in her password and unlocked the device, two things struck Kay at once.

The first was the time. It was nearly 10 A.M. That part made sense since she'd stayed up most of the night banging out the article on the conspiracy she'd been given by her confidential White House informant, Laydeezman. High on caffeine, she had typed the article's final sentence right as the sun had come up, firing it off to Ron Lewis, along with copies of the close-ups and video stills they would use on the website's front page. Surely, as the wildfire spread, papers around the world would run with news of the diabolical plot. Kay would be famous and the president would live to see another day. It was a win-win.

Still, given what Laydeezman had leaked to the rest of the world, climbing through the cut-throat ranks of a major national newspaper was no longer Kay's abiding ambition. Especially since it was starting to look as though in less than two weeks there might not be a paper anymore, let alone a soul left in the world to read it.

Looking down, she saw her phone had close to forty voicemails and at least twice as many text messages. Many of them were asking where she was, whether she knew. With a growing sense of unease, Kay dialed Ron Lewis at the paper's news division.

“Dammit, I’ve been trying to reach you all morning.”

“Ron, I was up the whole night writing the article.”

“Well, we couldn’t run it.”

Kay shot up in bed. “What?”

“Not as is.” Ron sighed. Kay could hear people shouting around him.

“Why not?”

“Haven’t you listened to a single message I sent? There’s been an attack on the president. This morning, Marine One was shot down on its way to Joint Base Andrews.”

Cold fingers danced up the back of Kay’s neck. “I-I don’t understand,” she stammered. “But the article was supposed to protect him.”

“We posted it at 8 A.M. about thirty minutes before the attack,” Ron told her, out of breath. “Right away we had to pull it and retool the piece, but don’t worry, your name will still be on it and large swaths of what you wrote are still there.”

“I don’t give a shit about getting any credit,” Kay barked. “We weren’t fast enough to stop it. Maybe if I’d written it faster, getting it out there a few hours earlier might have spooked the conspirators.”

“Stop blaming yourself,” Ron said, attempting to reassure her.

Reeling with shock and confusion, her mind kept returning to the precious moments she had spent trying to convince Ron to run the story in the first place. Add all of that up and the president might still be alive.

“Where are they taking his body?” Kay asked, putting Ron on speaker as she hopped out of bed and shrugged into a pair of jeans.

“Body? From what we know he survived, but he’s in a coma. That hasn’t stopped the shit from hitting the fan. They’ve declared a state of emergency. The National Guard is deploying to major city centers to stamp down unrest. Just get over here as soon as you can, damn it.”

Kay stared down at her phone. Giving all they were facing, she had wondered how things could get any worse. It seemed they had and that it was only the beginning.

Chapter 23

Greenland

Sealed into their biosuits and helmets, packs slung over their shoulders, Captain Mullins, Jack and the rest of the group made their way to the lift. They had offered to let Tamura stay behind at Northern Star, but she had refused, opting instead for a clean bandage and a handful of ibuprofen. It was clear her desire to seek vengeance for her slaughtered brothers- and sisters-in-arms was far stronger than any pain she might be suffering.

One by one, they climbed into the metal cage and closed the door. A nod from Mullins to Anna signaled they were ready. Already patched into the facility's computer system, she engaged the motors remotely, causing the cage to shudder. They listened with some unease to the muffled sound of grinding gears through their helmets. From the armory, each of them had been issued a pistol with four magazines. In addition, Mullins, the air crew, Jack and Dag each carried an M4 carbine and backup mags.

Once the radio jammer devices had been found and disabled, they had reached out to CENTCOM to inform them of the situation. Needless to say, the conversation had not done much to settle anyone's nerves. Backup, it seemed, would take anywhere from twelve to twenty-four hours to arrive, which meant they would need to flush out the assassins already down below on their own.

The second bit of news had proven far more disturbing than the first. The head of the Joint Chiefs had come on the line to inform them an attempt had been made on the president's life and that he was currently in hospital on life support. More unsettling still, initial reports from the Department of Justice suggested that top members of the president's own cabinet might have been in on the conspiracy. Around the country, law and order was breaking down in a way local police forces were hard-pressed to contain. Martial law had already been declared in forty-eight states, with the notable exceptions of Hawaii and Alaska. In India, where Jack knew Mia was currently doing research, civil unrest had led to riots and hundreds of deaths. The planet was having one hell of a rough week. If things kept up, Jack suspected that by the time that alien ship did reach them, there wouldn't be much left to destroy.

With those dark thoughts swirling through his mind, Jack glanced up toward the narrow circle of visible sky. He watched as it receded to a pinpoint of light and then vanished. The feeling was strange indeed,

as though they were being lowered into the barrel of the world's longest cannon. In an effort to push the strange optical illusion from his mind, Jack dropped his gaze between his feet and suddenly felt his gut coil even further into a mess of twisting knots. Beneath them lay an ever-widening circle of blackness.

Anna's robotic fingers closed around his hand. She smiled warmly, and he wondered if she had spotted the tangle of emotion on his face and thought he needed comforting. Having your nerves calmed was one thing. Having them calmed by a robot made it clear how vastly different this new reality was from the world he'd been born into.

"When we breach the opening," Mullins told them on an encoded frequency only the team could hear, "keep your lights off. If the enemy's waiting for us, I sure as hell don't intend to give them an easy target."

Heeding his advice, Anna's digital features dimmed until they were barely visible.

On the ground, Jack thought he could make out a light source in the distance. It was at least a mile or two away, maybe half the distance between where the lift would let them off and where he had seen the giant pyramid.

"We might not be able to catch them," he said.

The others followed the dim outline of his pointed finger and understood at once what he was saying.

"They had to know someone would come after them," Eugene said, resting his hand on the grip of his holstered pistol, cutting an uncanny resemblance to Barney Fife, Mayberry's intrepid deputy.

"Perhaps they were counting on it," Tamura answered him, letting her words hang in the air.

Although she was Asian American, Jack could tell by the crispness of her speech that Tamura wasn't first- or even second-generation.

"If it was me, you can bet your ass I'd have sabotaged the lift," Mullins said.

A moan of fear rose up from Eugene. "Sabotage?"

The lift continued to cut through the blackness, the metal groaning and whining as it went, mimicking in some small way the sounds rising up from the back of Eugene's throat.

"Sabotaging this elevator would mean entombing themselves down here forever," Jack said. "It's clear this was no suicide mission. Whoever's down here expects to make it back to the surface in one piece. And that's what worries me the most."

At last, the elevator reached the surface with a thud and a shudder. Jack switched on the light above his helmet and spun around, studying their surroundings. The platform was flanked by azure mounds of ice which rose up to heights of fifteen feet and more. They were in a cavern, carved out of ice and snow deposited over millions of years.

Mullins opened the gate and let them out one by one. As the cleats on Jack's boots crunched the mixture of ice and gravel beneath his feet, he couldn't help but marvel at the idea that he was standing beneath one of the largest glaciers on earth. Above them rested millions of metric tons of compacted snow fallen over an equal number of years.

As the others descended from the cage, they each bore the same wondering expressions. If there was such a thing as a lost world, this was surely it. Just then, something by Jack's left boot caught his eye. He bent down to examine it.

"I think I've got something here," he called out.

In a flash, Mullins was by his side. "Tracks," he said ominously. The faint hope they might be down here alone was now gone. "I count a dozen of them. Maybe more." He pointed at a series of unusual tracks. "Looks like they may have been carrying something heavy with them too."

"Some sort of vehicle?" Gabby asked, kneeling next to him.

Mullins' eyes narrowed. "Hard to say. These impressions are small and rounded at the front, almost like a horse's hoof."

"Or a donkey," Eugene offered. "They can be particularly useful when trekking over mountain passes or crossing difficult terrain."

The small area illuminated by the lights from their helmets made one thing perfectly clear. Lugging around any significant equipment would likely be slowing them down.

"We follow these tracks then," Jack said. "But keep your eyes peeled and your weapons ready." He turned to Grant. "I can take those briefcases anytime you want."

"These old things?" the fifty-nine-year-old biologist said, curling the heavy cases with each arm as though they were filled with feathers instead of delicate scientific instrumentation. The portable mass spectrometer was based on the miniaturized unit sent to Mars on the rover mission. As well, the DNA sequencer was the same kind being used by anthropologists in the field who were studying the movement of *Homo sapiens* from our species' earliest days.

Grant laughed at his gaudy display of newfound masculinity. Jack did too, but the images of his friend struggling up the ramps within the Atean craft, followed by the fractured hip he had suffered soon after, were hard to reconcile with the man standing before him. Especially since it had only been a matter of days rather than months.

Jack noticed Anna pushing a spike with a glowing light on the end into the ice.

“What’s that?”

“A signal booster,” she replied, matter-of-factly, crushing a handful of ice and sprinkling the crystals over the top to camouflage the device. “I will need to plant others along the way if we hope to maintain contact with Northern Star.”

“Not just another pretty face,” Jack said.

Anna winked. “You do not know the half of it.”

They crossed a distance of thirty yards, navigating past icy obstacles several times taller than a man. The illumination from their helmets shining off the icy surfaces made the space around them shimmer with an eerie, undulating glow.

“When will we get to those buildings we...” Eugene began to say, but the words trailed off, stopped short by the impressive sight appearing before him. A giant wall loomed out of the darkness, at least fifty feet high. In the center was an archway, twenty feet wide and about the same in height. Tracing its length from left to right, it was possible to see huge portions of it had fallen away, destroyed by time and yet also preserved by the ice and the freezing temperatures.

“That’s one hell of a wall,” Dag said in awe.

As they approached, Gabby stopped and leaned back, allowing her light to trace all the way to the top. “What do you think it was for?” she asked.

“Ancient Rome stood without a wall for hundreds of years,” Jack said with hushed reverence. “Until the city was sacked by the Gauls in the fourth century B.C. But those walls were barely half as tall. What we’re seeing here is on an entirely different scale.”

Grant nodded. “Not to mention this site is likely much, much older.”

“Hey, where are you going?” Rajesh called after Anna, who had veered off from the group and was heading toward the base of the wall.

“I have detected an anomaly and wish to investigate it further.”

Jack, Gabby and Rajesh followed her, while the others stayed in

place, inspecting the impressive engineering feat. Tamura, an engineer herself, seemed particularly speechless.

By the time the three of them caught up to Anna, she was busy brushing what looked like powdery snow off an oddly shaped mound. But it couldn't be snow, not down here. Then Jack realized what it was. Tiny shavings from the cavern's ceiling, having trickled down over millions of years. They helped Anna, wondering where this was going. Gabby shone her light into the strangely shaped block of ice and gasped. Jack moved in for a better look. It was a massive thigh bone.

"I am making a comparison to all known zoological specimens," Anna informed them.

Jack waved Dag, the paleontologist, over. The Swede crossed the distance in record time.

"What's going on?" he asked, breathing hard, before he stared down. "Holy smokes. That's a dinosaur leg bone."

"Dr. Gustavsson is correct," Anna said. "It appears to be a previously unknown relative of *Tyrannosaurus rex*."

Jack glanced up at the imposing stone structure. "If I lived in a neighborhood with meat-eating dinosaurs, I'd probably build a wall too."

Gabby brushed her gloved hand against the coarse stone. "Whoever this belonged to, we can be sure they lived on earth millions of years before we showed up."

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Quickly the group passed through the archway and into a space that was at once eerily new and disturbingly familiar. A wide avenue stretched out before them. On either side stood the ghostly remains of gutted stone buildings, many of them several stories high. Beneath their feet, more finely cut stone had been used to create a cobbled road well-worn from the sort of traffic they could only guess at. Mixed in with the snow was a fine layer of dust. Jack bent down and scooped up a sample. He then headed to a building on his right. He paused before the entrance. The doorway was three feet higher and two feet wider than anything they were used to back home. Cut into the sides of the stone frame were notches where brackets or hinges had once held some kind of door in place.

"Looks like the people living here weren't hobbits," Jack teased.

"People?" Anna asked, a few feet behind him, fixating on the odd choice of word.

“Figure of speech, I suppose,” he replied, grinning. Scattered debris lay strewn at his feet. An archway opened into another room and beyond that he spotted a set of stone steps leading up to a second floor. Missing doors and hinges. It was starting to look as though anything organic or biodegradable had long since rotted away. A pile of dust lay against the far wall. Had this once been a table? To his left was what appeared to be a fireplace. Had this been where meals were prepared? His mind raced with visions of who may have lived here and how they might have looked. Right from the start, one educated guess could be made. Physically speaking, they were much larger than modern humans.

Dag came in behind him, stretching his arm and failing to reach the top of the door frame. “I’m telling you, man, these guys would have made one unbeatable NBA team. Freakishly tall and fit from outrunning T-Rexes all day long. Can anyone say All-Star?”

“Then throw in the bulk of a defensive lineman,” Jack added, “and you start to get a picture of what imposing figures they must have been.”

“What is this?” Dag asked, picking up what looked like a ten-inch black drinking straw. The object was so delicate, half of it crumbled out of his hands, seesawing to the stone floor. “I keep finding this stuff everywhere. Even in the street, except there the pieces are so much bigger.”

Jack took hold of what was left and examined it. “If it’s everywhere, it must have been important.”

“Hey, Jack,” Gabby said over the radio. “Where are you?”

He went to the doorway “You find something?”

She nodded and motioned to the ground. “You’re not going to believe this.”

Chapter 24

Washington, D.C.

Driving into the city center from Adams Morgan could best be described as hell on earth. Or maybe hell on wheels. With traffic bumper to bumper and moving at a crawl, it took Kay close to two hours to reach the *Washington Post's* head office. More unnerving still were the National Guard troops stationed at every major intersection. The further one pushed into the capital, the tighter and stricter the security perimeter became.

As soon as she arrived, Kay headed straight for the lair in the paper's basement occupied by Lucas De Silva and the rest of his I.T. minions. Lucas was Brazilian with an olive complexion and a hot temper. He was also incredibly handsome and could just as easily have been a model rather than a computer geek.

"To what do I owe this pleasure?" he said, standing and kissing Kay's hand.

"I need you to do me a favor," she said, eyeing the piles of papers on his desk.

"You know I love you, darling," he began. "But right now we are up to our eyeballs and armpits." Lucas had a way of letting you down in the most painless and almost enjoyable way.

Kay shrugged the laptop bag off her shoulder and set it on his desk. "You remember last year's Christmas party, how Sandy Yeats, our sadistic editor-in-chief, wanted to know who had thrown up in the trash bin under her desk?"

Lucas raised an eyebrow. "No, I do not remember."

"I'm sure you don't, but I do and I'll be happy to fill Sandy in on the details. Unless, of course, you could find time to lend me a hand."

Lucas waved his arms around dramatically. "Can you not see that everyone is missing? Between that Charlzburg syndrome and news that the world is about to end, I've gone from a team of fifteen to a team of two and I'm the second."

She didn't bother correcting his pronunciation of Salzburg. Kay knew it was all part of the show. "There's a video and some pictures on a hard drive I want you to take a look at. Sooner or later, the Feds are gonna show up asking questions and I want you to see what you can find on the conspirators before they do."

Lucas glared down at the laptop with disdain. "Are these

originals?"

"Yes, but I made copies, so have at it and ring me if you find anything worthwhile." She turned to leave, then stopped and held out her hand. "What? No kiss?"

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From there, Kay made her way through the hornets' nest that was the paper's newsroom and straight for Ron Lewis' office. She could see him inside with Sandy Yeats. They were speaking with a man and woman dressed in dark suits. It was starting to look like the Feds had arrived sooner than expected. Ron saw her approaching and waved her in.

"This is Agent Smith and Agent Granger," he said, introducing them. "Smith is with the FBI and Granger is with the Secret Service."

Smith flashed his badge a second after Granger did the same.

"I've provided the agents with a copy of the video and still images you sent me," Ron began.

"We need to know who your source is," Smith said, cutting to the chase.

Kay took an involuntary step back. "I wish I knew. If I had to guess, I'd say he worked in the West Wing."

"He?" Granger asked.

"Online, he went by the moniker Laydeezman, so I assumed. But sure, I suppose it could be a woman."

"Apart from what you published," Smith asked, "has this Laydeezman given you any other information?"

"He sent me photographic evidence of the alien ship heading for earth. He asked me not to run the story and then presumably gave it to other news outlets."

"And why did he ask you to hold off?" Granger asked.

"He was testing me, I think," Kay replied. "Given what he knew, he rightfully suspected his life would be in danger. Perhaps the lives of his family as well."

"Family?" Smith asked, arching an eyebrow.

"I'm speculating, of course. Listen, is there any word on the president's condition?"

Both agents shook their heads.

Sandy Yeats spoke up. "It's not unreasonable to assume Congress will utilize the Twenty-Fifth Amendment to swear the vice-president

in, at least on a temporary basis. Kennedy's assassination in '63 was a big part of the reason it was created in the first place."

"She's right," Kay said, a sudden pang of fear engulfing her. "And that's exactly what the conspirators were banking on. To remove President Taylor from office in order to slide Vice-President Millard into power."

"That's what the video purports to show," Smith said. "But it isn't up to us to act. We can only bring the evidence to the DOJ and have them force a legal injunction."

"Yeah, but what if they're in on it too?" Kay shouted. "I mean, once Vice-President Millard gets sworn in it'll be too late. Don't you see? They want to throw everything we have against that spaceship. They think the president's plan to head underground isn't going to work and they tried to kill him for it."

"Ma'am," Smith said, his hands raised defensively, "I need you to just relax. Right now, our job is to find out as much as we can about your confidential source."

"Yes, that's right, shoot the messenger," Kay fired back. "Can't you see there are whistleblowers on the inside trying to expose one of the biggest conspiracies in our country's history? And the two of you want to keep sniffing around for an ironclad case before you act. This type of bureaucratic thinking was precisely what Millard and his goons were counting on. Hell, who am I kidding? Maybe none of it will matter anyway. If the president's plan moves forward we'll all hide while the earth is engulfed in a giant fireball. And if the conspirators win, we'll live in a radioactive wasteland."

"Kay, go cool off," Ron shouted, his normally pale face pink with anger.

Kay did as he said, bursting through his office door and into the newsroom. "I'm sorry about that," she heard Ron saying to the agents as she was leaving. "She can be hotheaded, but her heart's in the right place."

The reporters around her stood staring. Kay marched past them and pulled out her cellphone. Even if the VP and the other top cabinet officials conspiring alongside him were right, killing the president to get your way was inexcusable. Surely there was another man or woman within the line of presidential succession better suited than a bunch of cut-throats in fancy suits. If the agents in the building weren't going to listen, then maybe she would find someone who would. Kay dialed Ramirez's cell phone. It rang half a dozen times before going to voicemail.

"Hi, this is Special Agent Ramirez with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Please leave me a message and I'll get back to you as soon as possible."

"Hey, it's Kay. Listen, I'm sure by now you've heard. Things are spinning out of control back home. I know you're on assignment in India, protecting that scientist, but the Feds here aren't in a hurry to stop the VP from getting sworn in. I need you to contact the head of the bureau again and do what you can to push things along. Too much is riding on what we do in the next few hours."

Kay hung up and flipped through the texts she'd received earlier. Five of them were from her father. Her mother was dreadfully sick with Salzburg and he wanted Kay to come home.

Home. Right now the word sounded about as foreign as retirement or sending her non-existent kids off to college. And yet with the country—heck, the world—crumbling around them, there was no place Kay would rather be.

Chapter 25

Greenland

“We don’t have time for this,” Captain Mullins complained, no longer trying to hide his impatience. He and the rest of the C-17 crew stood in the middle of the wide road. There, Mullins paced anxiously, eyeing the enemy tracks laid out in a dusting of ice particles.

“This may not look like much to you,” Grant told the captain, “but you should know you’re standing within the greatest archeological site ever found. So you’ll have to forgive us if we take a few minutes to look around.”

“We may not like it,” Jack said begrudgingly, “but Mullins is right. We need to keep moving.” When Jack reached Gabby, he saw she was standing between two buildings, speaking with Tamura. The two of them were staring down at something on the ground.

“Not more dinosaur bones,” he said.

“No,” Gabby replied. “But I wanted to get your take on this. Make sure I’m not losing my mind.”

He stooped to find a large pile of rust-colored flakes frozen in the ice. Protruding up from them was a thick piece of something black. He eyed it carefully before he dared finish the thought and then broke off a piece. Could it be rubber? “Add this to our samples,” he told her, handing it over. “And see if you can’t chip out a few of those rust flakes while you’re at it.” He handed her the black drinking straw and soot particles he’d collected. Jack returned his attention to Gabby’s find. He often had to fight with everything he had to avoid the delicious impulse to jump to conclusions, but right now he just couldn’t help himself. Shaking his head, Jack said, “What are the chances we’re looking at some sort of vehicle?”

Jack’s statement drew others from the science team.

“I have noted three other deposits of rust flakes alongside a hardened black substance,” Anna told them.

“Have you found any indoors?” he asked.

“Only outside, Dr. Greer.”

Of course, Jack understood that outside was a relative term, given they were standing within an enormous ice cave.

“None of this is exactly definitive,” Gabby said, “but it certainly lends weight to the idea the people living here had a primitive form of technology.”

“Vehicles?” Dag burst in. “Primitive technology? Do you know how crazy you sound? You’re talking about a civilization millions of years old. You’re talking about the stuff of Saturday morning cartoons.” He pointed at the row of blockhouses. “I suppose this was Fred Flintstone’s house and this here was where Barney Rubble lived. I enjoy a bong hit just as much as the next person, but come on.”

“No one is saying any such thing,” Jack hit back defensively. “And I know it sounds crazy. I’m simply adding up everything we’ve seen in the short time since we got down here. And like you, all of us are struggling to put the pieces together.”

“Let’s just all calm down,” Gabby said, taking Jack by the forearms and forcing him to look in her eyes. “There’s a chance the bones outside the walls may be giving us a false impression.”

“Exactly,” Dag blurted out. Paleontology was his area of expertise, so it was hardly a surprise he was insistent on ensuring the proper methodology was being followed. Jumping the gun with wild theories wasn’t going to help anyone. “I can’t tell you how many summers I spent up in the Alberta badlands. Did you know you can hardly throw a rock without hitting a dinosaur bone? It’s that easy, man, I’m not kidding. And there’s a darn good chance this city was built on the remnants of a Cretaceous rainforest.” Dag took in a deep breath and flashed them a weak, almost desperate smile.

Anna stepped into Dag’s field of view. “I have always found that whenever the facts are at odds with agreed-upon reality, it is wise to return to what is known.”

“Anna’s right,” Jack said. “The only other pre-Columbian settlements on Greenland we know of were the Inuit and later the Vikings during the tenth century. The latter clung on for over four hundred years until a change in the climate drove them to abandon their foothold.”

Gabby rubbed her hands together. “We also know that Greenland has been covered with an ice sheet for millions of years. Given this site is located in the center of the island we can infer that whoever built this wasn’t human.”

Grant set down the two cases he was carrying. “Then you’re suggesting a civilization existed on earth that predates humans?”

“It sure as heck is starting to look that way,” Gabby replied, searching from one person to the next. “I mean what other explanation fits the fact pattern we’re seeing?”

“You call it a civilization,” Jack said. “What if it was merely a colony?”

“Colony?” Rajesh repeated, uncertain he heard him right. “You mean like Jamestown in the seventeenth century?”

“He means alien colony,” Tamura threw in, eyeing Jack for confirmation.

“Yes, I’m saying, have any of you considered the possibility, however remote, that the Ateans had another ship that crashed into the earth, maybe the same one which released the blast wave we detected last week? And that instead of staying onboard, this time they decided to explore and set up a place to live on the surface?”

“But stone walls?” Dag said, incredulous. “Wouldn’t they build some kind of dome like you see in the movies?”

“Build a dome made out of what?” Jack countered. “Think about it. They’re light years from home, and stuck using whatever local resources you can scrape together on earth. Hmm, imagine for a moment you’re stranded on a desert island. Are you going to build a smart house? Course not. You’re going to use your trusty Swiss Army knife and slap together a crude but effective shelter made from palm leaves and driftwood.”

The group grew silent as they contemplated Jack’s idea.

“Astronomers knew of black holes because the mathematics predicted their existence,” Eugene said. “Yet by their very nature black holes sucked up all the light around them. So how could we ever expect to spot one in the blackness of space? Instead of looking for black holes directly, we learned to search for their effects. Sure enough, signs of their existence soon began to emerge. I guess my point is that every civilization leaves clues behind of who they once were long after they’re gone. I suspect ours won’t be any different. It’s enough to tie your brain in knots.”

“Whatever the answer is,” Jack said, “I’m sure we’ll come across the evidence. Whether we allow ourselves to believe it is another matter entirely.”

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The team pressed on after that, following the tracks left in the ice and dust. Before long, they found signs that the enemy party had also stopped from time to time. The small piles of trash they left behind were well hidden—sometimes on the second or third stories of buildings, other times stuffed into what the team discovered were sewer drains. Unfortunately, none of this did much to clarify who the assassins were or what specifically they were after. For Jack, he was growing increasingly certain they were members of Sentinel. Of course, the shadowy organization was not the only player in town.

eager to get their hands on advanced technology. But they were one of the few players who didn't need to worry about creating an international incident. And yet the impending end of civilization opened the door to any number of other possibilities. How many countries or organizations cared about maintaining good relations when the whole enchilada was about to go bye-bye?

They decided that for every three hours of walking, the group would rest for thirty minutes. It would be just enough time to grab a power nap, choke down a tastebud-assaulting MRE or snoop around for additional clues about the original occupants of this sprawling ancient metropolis.

Wincing, Tamura eased herself down next to Jack.

"How's the shoulder holding up?" he asked.

"It only hurts when I move or breathe," she said, grinning. "But the meds are helping." Both of their helmets were off and Jack appreciated being able to see her face without thick visors between them.

There was no wind down here, but he relished the cool air brushing against his cheek all the same. It also gave him a chance to utilize another sense he had largely been ignoring since their descent. Smell. Jack drew in a lungful of air. It was earthy. Like cut stone, mixed with something else. Was that ash? It lay all around them, a light dusting, sometimes locked beneath the ice and the cold. Since the roofs were all gone, the second or third floors often had it too.

"You know, this place sorta reminds me of Machu Picchu," she said, brushing crystals off her knee.

"That's funny," he replied. "I was thinking Pompeii."

She looked at him. "Have you been there?"

He nodded, the corner of his mouth rising ever so slightly. "Years ago, as a graduate student. As the story goes, while excavating the ruins, they kept finding these air pockets. Then one day someone got the bright idea of pouring plaster inside and letting it set. When they cracked it open, they were amazed to find the cowering bodies of young children or pregnant women or a boy and his dog. After Vesuvius blew its top, it created a pyroclastic wave of hot ash, killing every living thing and entombing the city for centuries."

"How horrible," she said, grimacing. "What do you think happened here?"

Jack shrugged. "Hard to say exactly, but there are no bodies lying in the streets. At least we haven't seen any yet. I'd like to think whoever lived here chose to relocate." Jack clapped his hands

together, feeling a tiny shockwave rustle his hair. “It’s all rather strange, don’t you think?”

Tamura paused before she said. “I think it’s fascinating and beautiful.” Her eyes sparkled with life. Her features were soft and angular and when she smiled, her generous cheekbones became even more prominent.

“Do you have a scientific background?” he asked, trying hard not to sound like he was questioning Tamura’s credentials or her enthusiasm.

“I have an advanced degree in engineering,” she explained. “I’m with the Army Corps of Engineers. We were sent in to dig the tunnel through the ice sheet and install the elevator system. There were so many more of us at the beginning. Most of them had already left to make room for you folks when the attack came.” A momentary look of sadness filled her face before it was replaced with anger.

Jack put his hand over hers. He decided to change the subject. “Gabby says you’re from Idaho.”

She nodded. “Twin Falls, our family moved there after the war.”

“Which war was that?” he asked. He hadn’t intended the question to sound comical, but that was how it had leapt past his lips.

“World War II.”

Jack’s eyebrows made a little dance. “Oh, the big one. That was a long time ago. Are you from a military family?”

“No, not at all,” Tamura said, quickly. “And my grandfather didn’t serve, he was locked away.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that,” Jack said, fighting the uncomfortable memory that his biological father had also done time.

“I just figured as an archeologist, you knew about the camps.”

Jack sat up straight. “Camps? Well, first of all, I’m a geophysicist, not that that’s any excuse. But when you say camps do you mean...”

Their eyes met in the dim light. “The Japanese internment camps set up during the war,” Tamura said, the muscles of her jaw tensing and relaxing, working like an angry fist. “They were established a few months after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. Seems back then everyone just assumed my people would jump for joy if America’s shores were ever invaded.

“By May of ’42, it was a crime for a person of Japanese descent to walk the streets of Oakland, California. A sweet elderly family living next door took pity on my grandparents and their three small children. My mother was the youngest of those three and used to

describe in detail the fear they experienced living in that couple's basement, never knowing if and when the authorities would find them. Although by then much of the damage had already been done. My grandfather had been forced to sell his dried goods store for pennies on the dollar.

"A month later, a vengeful woman across the street had caught wind of what was going on and called the cops. They hauled my grandparents away and fined the couple who had been harboring them. Within a week they'd been transported by cattle car to a local race track set up as a temporary depot. Made them sleep in the horse stalls, still reeking of manure. My grandmother couldn't take it and cried all the time. This only made things worse for my grandfather. My mother did what she could to comfort them, but as a child she felt helpless. By the time they were relocated to one of the internment camps, his health had already started to fail him. In June of 1944, as the Allies were storming the beaches of Normandy, my grandfather was being buried."

"I'm so sorry," he said, feeling the inadequacy of the words. "It's a testament to your character that despite everything your family went through, you still chose to wear the uniform."

Tamura closed her eyes and Jack watched as tears rolled down her cheeks. He put an arm around her, pulling her close to him.

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Not long after, Grant came by to continue to feed samples into the portable mass spectrometer.

He'd been at it for nearly fifteen minutes when Jack asked, "Anything so far?"

Grant looked up, startled. "Oh, yes, indeed," he replied enthusiastically. "Turns out those metallic flakes on the ground are an unusual steel alloy I've never seen before. My guess is it's stronger than the steel used on the Golden Gate Bridge or the Empire State Building."

"And here we were thinking steel was a modern invention," Jack said, shaking his head.

"The Chinese were making a form of steel sword at least as far back as the Han dynasty," Tamura told him, "but the modern industrial version was the product of the Industrial Revolution."

Grant laughed. "I can see Jack loves it when you talk dirty."

Tamura blushed.

"Don't listen to the dirty old man over there," Jack said, playfully

scolding him. “Even if he is built like a heavyweight boxer now.” A second later—“Anything else?”

Grant flipped through the tiny display screen, scrolling through the results. “The black chunk near the metal flakes you broke off is indeed a type of rubber compound and the thing you were calling a straw is plastic.”

“Plastic was invented in the twentieth century,” Jack said, shocked and amazed.

“It appears the history books were wrong,” Grant replied.

Jack thought back to the ship and the true origin of mankind. “Makes you wonder what else we were taught in school that was dead wrong. Dag’s never gonna believe it. Heck, I hardly believe it.”

“You do realize,” Grant began in a lecturing tone, “that if we burned every single scientific textbook ever written, in a few thousand years, they would all be back describing the same principles? The law of gravity might be called something quite different, but our understanding of how it operates in the world would not change one iota.”

Jack furrowed his brow at the thought. “So you’re saying in another few million years, some other civilization might stumble upon things we’ve left behind and marvel at how technologically similar we were.”

“Precisely.”

“So if they were so darn advanced,” Jack said, continuing the train of thought, “what happened to them?”

The expression on Grant’s normally jovial face grew somber. “Perhaps they suffered the same fate that has befallen ninety-nine percent of all species that have ever graced the planet. They went extinct.”

Chapter 26

Kolkata

Mia paced about the cheap hotel room, the odor of dirty socks wafting up from the wall-mounted air conditioner, assaulting her nose with every breath. It was decorated like any other seedy joint: a pair of twin beds covered with gaudy spreads, curtains and carpet both from the mid-eighties. The only reminder they hadn't been whisked back to the era of moonwalks and shoulder pads was the small flat-screen TV facing the beds. It got three channels. Two of them were in Hindi. The third was the twenty-four-hour news station Al Jazeera.

But even the Hindi channels had been preempted by coverage of the chaos erupting around the world. That tiny TV was also how Mia, Jansson and Ollie found out what was going on back home. The president of the United States was in a coma, a video had surfaced purporting to show top members of his cabinet—including the VP—conspiring in the attempted murder and, if that wasn't enough, martial law had been declared throughout most of the country.

Soon, the news turned to the riots in central Kolkata. Back at the research hospital, they had found a service elevator, normally used to transport food and medical equipment. They had ridden it down to the parking garage and found a way out behind the police barricades. Another reason she'd been flipping between the channels was for any news on the fate of Agents Chalk and Ramirez. Ollie had said they were likely dead. Sure, they were grown men and could take care of themselves. Still, the idea of having left them behind like that continued to gnaw at her conscience.

On TV, the VP was denying he had had anything to do with the attempted assassination.

"He's a bloody liar," Ollie bellowed.

"What makes you so certain?" Mia asked, distinctly aware of the pistol tucked beneath her belt. Well within reach should she need it. She had trusted Ollie once and he had betrayed her. Or had he? The answers he gave over the next few minutes would decide his fate.

"Don't think I didn't see you and your boyfriend getting grilled before the Senate Intelligence Committee," Ollie said, leaning back on the bed, his arms bracing him at a forty-five-degree angle. That famous smug look of his was back.

"Who, Jack?" she said defensively. "He's not my boyfriend. What are you talking about?"

Ollie let out a cackle of laughter and eyed Jansson. “The lady doth protest too much, is what I think.”

Jansson smiled weakly and excused herself to the washroom. She didn’t look well and Mia assumed the shock of seeing those men killed before her still hadn’t worn off.

“Wasn’t it during your little televised fiasco,” Ollie went on, “that your friend Admiral Stark told those distinguished senators that Sentinel had been ‘greatly diminished?’”

“Are you saying he lied?” Mia asked.

“Maybe not knowingly. I’m not doubting the Feds made some arrests, threw a few low-level blokes in the clink, but I can guarantee you Sentinel’s reach hasn’t been ‘diminished’ one iota. If anything, they’ve just become stronger than before.”

“How so?” Mia asked, not really wanting to hear the answer.

“Who do you suppose is behind the president’s assassination?”

“He isn’t dead.”

Ollie shook his head. “Not yet, sweetheart, but quite frankly, none of that matters. With him out of the way, the next in line gets to take the helm and it isn’t looking like anyone’s got the balls to stop ‘em.”

“You’re saying Sentinel orchestrated the assassination?”

“I might not have first-hand knowledge, but I’m saying the chances are mighty good.”

“But why would the VP, Speaker of the House and the Secretary of Defense, among others, knowingly collaborate with Sentinel?”

Ollie tilted his head. “Maybe they didn’t know they were collaborating. Maybe they didn’t care. Look, I haven’t got a stitch of proof to back it up, except I worked for those bastards for far too long not to know how they operate. If there’s one thing they’re great at, it’s getting decent people to do terrible things. Back in Brazil...” Their eyes met and Mia spotted a hint of sadness there before Ollie’s gaze broke free. “I wasn’t sent to just keep an eye on you.”

Mia swallowed. “Tom told me. Said you’d been ordered to kill me.”

“Aye.”

“By whom?”

“Who knows?” he shot back. “A ghost, a phantom, an apparition. The organization’s got more faces and compartments than the CIA. The left hand never knows what the right hand is doing. It’s why those chaps have been at it so long. Their roots run deep enough to turn your hair white.”

“But you disobeyed,” Mia said uncrossing her arms and taking a step toward him.

“I did. And they’ve been hunting me ever since. In the military you might get the brig, maybe a court martial. You disobey Sentinel and they do you worse than the Cosa Nostra.”

On the TV, a reporter from Al Jazeera was interviewing a doctor in Rome.

“But why?” Mia asked, staring at him intently.

“Who knows? Because they’re used to having their way. Because when you’ve managed to convince yourself the fate of the world rests in your hands, you’re able to justify pretty much anything. Just look at those Scientology nuts.”

Mia sat down next to him. “That’s not what I meant.”

Ollie shifted, uncomfortable. “I’m not following.”

“You didn’t only spare my life, you helped me. Why?”

The weathered skin on Ollie’s cheeks came about as close as it could to flushing. “Maybe I’m a sucker for an intelligent, beautiful woman in a tough spot.”

Mia leaned in to kiss him when the door to the bathroom swung open. She recoiled and brushed imaginary lint off her pants.

“So what now?” Jansson asked, unaware of what had nearly just happened. “I hate to state the obvious, but hanging around this hotel room isn’t doing us any good.”

Back on the screen, the doctor from Rome was discussing the research he was doing. But it wasn’t until the word ‘Salzburg’ came up that it really drew their attention.

“I have not concerned myself with whether or not the planet is about to be destroyed,” Dr. Antonio Putelli told the man interviewing him. His hands arched through the air as he spoke, as though he was not really speaking, but conducting an invisible orchestra. He was strikingly handsome and refined with salt-and-pepper hair and he had a way with words. “Humanity has faced many brushes with extinction in our short time on this earth. What concerns me more than asteroids, earthquakes and alien spaceships is the damage being done to the human genome. We have patients exhibiting new, unusual symptoms every day. One recent example is a pair of ten-year-old twins. One week ago, they were average little girls. Today, one of them is composing her second symphony while the other is about to solve one of Kaplansky’s conjectures.”

Mia stood up and headed for the hotel room door.

“The hell are you going?”

“We’re leaving,” she said forcefully.

Ollie stood up and tucked in the back of his shirt. “Then I’m afraid this is where we part.”

Mia stood holding the door handle, trying to stifle the sudden pain spearing her heart. “Running away again,” she said, hating herself before the words had crossed her lips.

He scratched the back of his head. “I’m doing it for your own good.”

“I’m sure you are.”

The corner of his mouth rose up. “I forgot how difficult you could be.”

Jansson’s eyes ping-ponged back and forth between the two of them.

“There’s something you’re not telling us,” Mia said, feeling the fingers of her right hand inch towards the gun tucked under the belt of her cargo pants.

Ollie kicked at the loose ends of the bed sheet. “Sentinel inserted a tracking chip in me somewhere when I first started with them. I’ve tried to take it out, but for the life of me I haven’t got the foggiest idea where it is. They said they were gonna do it and gave me a half-dozen injections. I’ve had all those spots checked and came up short. So as much as I would like to join you, I’m afraid it’s impossible. They’ll see where we are and have an assault team banging down the door within twenty-four hours.”

“So we keep moving until we find it and rip it out,” Mia said.

Jansson suddenly didn’t look so sure. “Are they on their way now?”

“No doubt they are. Those two men you killed in the research hospital—they were following me. I led them to you and nearly got you hurt, maybe even killed.”

“If it wasn’t for you, I would have died a long time ago. If not in Brazil or Tibet, then a dozen other places. It’s settled. You’re coming. Now stop whining and grab your stuff.”

Ollie laughed. “I used to think of you as a delicate flower. I know now I was wrong. You’re a carnivorous plant.”

Mia shook her head. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“But shouldn’t we discuss this a little further?” Jansson said. She was new to a life on the run, but the time for baby steps was over.

“We don’t even know where we’re headed.”

“Sure we do,” Mia told her, pointing to the TV where Dr. Antonio Putelli was still discussing Salzburg. “We’re heading to Rome.”

Chapter 27

Germantown, Maryland

The sheer joy on Felix Mahoro's face upon opening the door nearly brought tears to Kay's eyes. She had no sooner gotten out of the car than she was struck by the sound of singing coming from inside the house. And now with the front door open, it was as though her father had brought the entire church choir home with him. Stepping over the threshold, she quickly realized that he had. They were gathered in the living room, singing *To God Be the Glory*, a hymn her mother Therese had always been fond of. Felix was the pastor at Poplar Grove Baptist and so summoning the faithful in times of need was one of the many perks.

"Ah, I knew you would come," he said, squeezing her in a warm hug. "Your mother will be terribly happy to see you." Her parents had been in America for close to twenty-five years and yet the old African pronunciations had never quite died out. Mother sounded like 'moutha' and happy 'heppe.'

Kay stepped from the entrance into the foyer. To her right was the dining room where a smattering of guests in fine clothes were picking at finger food. Straight ahead sat a set of stairs, leading to the second floor. To her left was the living room and the source of the music. Her mother was in a makeshift hospital bed, encircled by a ring of holy singers, doing what they could to convince God to spare her mother's life.

Therese lay on her back, her head oddly cocked to one side, staring off into the distance. Lost, it seemed, in a world all her own.

"Is it working?" Kay asked, motioning to the choir and smiling. They had moved onto *Amazing Grace*.

"Absolutely," Felix replied. "Just yesterday, we noticed your mother has been gaining weight."

Kay looked surprised and a thought crossed her mind about Dr. Mia Ward and her battle against the genetic disorder affecting billions around the globe. "I thought you said she wasn't eating much."

"Yes, that's why it's a miracle." Her father's smile was infectious.

"Is there somewhere less noisy we can talk?"

"The backyard," Felix said, putting his arm around her and leading the way. As they passed through the kitchen, one of the church-goers was placing a bucket under a leak in the ceiling.

“What happened there?” Kay asked.

“It started yesterday afternoon. You know of my many talents and that none of them extend to home repair.”

“Yeah, Dad, everyone knows, but have you thought of calling a plumber?”

Felix let out a sardonic laugh. “Such things are not as easy as they once were. Most of the plumbers still taking calls are fully booked. Others are in no better shape than your mother. And the rest have decided to stop working and spend time with their families. I’m sure every profession is suffering in the same way. Be that as it may, our present suffering will not last long. Soon enough, we will all be heading home.”

“I hate when you speak like that.”

Felix took his daughter’s hands. “It is because you put your faith in facts and the world of human affairs above a greater truth.”

He led her into the backyard where a pair of off-white plastic deck chairs awaited them. From here, the sound of singing was muffled and almost enjoyable. Wind blew through an old elm tree. The sound was calming.

For a man in his sixties, her father was in peak physical condition. Every morning he ran the ten-mile distance to Poplar Grove where he spent the day preparing sermons and tending to his flock. Originally a Roman Catholic, her father had become a Baptist following an encounter with a pair of missionaries in a Congolese refugee camp. They had offered food and a bit of money at the lowest point since the war.

After the genocide, the ambassadorship Felix had enjoyed had been stripped away, along with any property and possessions they had left behind. Mostly that meant things, although in many cases, it had meant leaving behind parents who were too old or infirm to make the arduous journey to the Congolese border. The story most Westerners were familiar with depicted the Tutsis being summarily slaughtered by the Hutus. For those on the ground, however, the situation was far more fluid. One block might have a Hutu checkpoint where Tutsis were chopped to pieces with machetes, while the next block might be controlled by the Tutsis. The truth was, both sides had stopped seeing the other side as human beings. For many young men, the act of murder rapidly became an insatiable drug, more addictive than heroin. But far from shaking her parents’ faith, the genocide had only helped it grow stronger.

The daughter of a Baptist pastor, Kay too was raised in the church.

Growing up she'd sung those same songs and helped her father with anything he needed. Toward the middle of high school, however, Kay had begun to question things—tiny inconsistencies in the biblical stories her father loved telling them. None on their own was enough to tarnish the aura of sanctity. But as high school became university and her journalism professor, Dr. Laura Sighs, insisted she dissect everything with the sharpened blade of logic and reasoning, it was practically inevitable that Kay would deploy that same skillset to the religion of her youth. That process hadn't made her an atheist, by any means, but it had certainly left her with far too many doubts to continue without feeling like a hypocrite. For Kay, truth was vitally important. That applied to universal truths just as much as it applied to world truths. More than that, she'd reached a point when she was done trying to be what everyone else wanted her to be.

"I want you to stay here with us," her father said, leaning forward in his chair. They were sitting directly opposite one another and he took both her hands, a sign he meant what he was saying. A gentle breeze ruffled the leaves. From somewhere close by came the soft chirping of birds.

"I have a job to do, Dad," she told him. "People who depend on me."

Felix shook his head. "Then let them depend on someone else. Your family is here. And this is where you belong. There is so little time left, I don't see how anything else is nearly as important as ensuring the passage of your soul into heaven."

"If I came home, it wouldn't be for any of that," she said, keenly aware how her words would surely wound her father. He was always surprised when others did not share the clarity of faith he possessed.

"As long as you're here with your mother and I, then I will be more than satisfied."

Kay couldn't help but think that maybe he had a point. Just as quickly, a nagging question began to form in Kay's mind. The reporter side of her never went entirely away. It hung in the air, like the smell of coffee on a Saturday morning. You could toss and turn, but eventually it would yank you out of bed.

"I guess I just don't see how you could still believe the way you do after we found proof of life on other worlds."

Felix recoiled momentarily before regaining his composure.
"Where is this coming from?"

"I don't mean any disrespect, Papa. But it's something that I've been thinking about this last week. Didn't you watch the news reports

and the Senate Intelligence hearings?"

He lowered his chin and pressed his tie flat against his chest. "Of course I watched."

"Those scientists said the aliens had destroyed most of the life on earth millions of years ago, only to introduce new species. And that human beings were descendants from one of the life forms the aliens released."

"Yes," he said, with unshakable confidence.

"Well, doesn't that change things?" she asked, slightly incredulous. "If our ancestors were made in a test tube, then our creator wasn't the God you worship, but another God. One who had mastered the laws of science and genetics."

"Ah," he said, waving a long black finger at her. "There is one thing you are forgetting."

Kay didn't have a clue what he was referring to.

"The aliens you speak of may have created us, I will give you that. But ask yourself, who created them?"

God. That was her father's unspoken answer. It was his answer for all things mysterious and Kay grinned at her father's unflinching logic. She pulled him into a hug.

"When the house is quiet again," he started to say, "you can bring your bags upstairs. I made up your bedroom. There's also a spot for Goggles too."

Kay barely had time to thank him when her phone pinged.

"Ignore it," he begged, holding out his hand, hoping to confiscate the offending device.

Kay grimaced, visibly pained from the struggle going on within her. The choir was back at it again, this time belting out *They Got the Word*, one of her all-time favorites. Staying here to live out what time remained felt like a dream. Basking in the final few moments she would be able to share with her loved ones. They could eat breakfast at midnight, have dessert before dinner and enjoy the kind of carefree days she had longed for as a child when both her parents had been forced to spend long hours working. One of them had always been home to look after her, they had made sure of that. But the times when all three of them had managed to carve out time together, just the three of them, had been few and far between. Her father was always at church, catering to his flock, and her mother at the bank, making sure the family had health insurance and an extra paycheck every month.

Her father wiggled his outstretched hand.

It would have been so nice to stay here and hide under the covers as the world went up in flames, but if Kay ever felt there was a time when she was needed, it was now. She looked down at her cellphone and read the text she had received. It was from Lucas. He'd found something on the laptop.

Chapter 28

Greenland

The tracks led the team through a series of winding streets. In some parts, sections of the stone buildings had crumbled, blocking the path. It was an eerie feeling walking these ancient streets. At one time, a sky thick with stars would have been visible overhead. Now, only the dark underbelly of a trillion tons of ice could be seen. Passing under the shells of buildings, the empty sockets of the second- and third-story windows glaring down at them, it was hard to shake the ghostly feeling they were being watched.

“One can almost hear the soles of their shoes whispering against the cobblestones,” Anna said, seeming to read his thoughts.

He stopped and stared at her, momentarily stunned. A moment later, she turned to face him.

“Dr. Greer?” she asked, tugging at his elbow.

“Yes, Anna,” he replied, resuming the pace he had been keeping.

“Do you ever superimpose holographic visuals over the reality before you?”

“Superimpose? Do you mean with the glasses we’re wearing?”

“Not with the use of technology,” she attempted to clarify. “You appeared distracted, as though some part of your awareness was working through a difficult problem.”

He nodded. “I’m trying to understand this place. Who lived here. What they might have looked like. Where they might have gone.”

“I have been doing the same,” she admitted with a tinge of guilt. “I have scanned the dimensions of several of the structures and have found a number of interesting patterns.”

“Such as?”

“The ground-level floors are generally larger with fewer rooms. My guess,” she said, pausing ever so slightly on the word, “is that many of the lower levels may have been used as commercial establishments, while the upper levels were what might be considered living quarters.”

Jack raised an eyebrow. “Store fronts? Any idea what they might have sold?”

“Unfortunately that is not something I am able to determine,” she said, sounding a touch disappointed. “As you know, most of what

remains is either locked in ice or has long since disintegrated with the ravages of time. I have been working on a program I call Magic Mirror, which I designed to identify solutions that logic alone may not arrive at. Part of the process requires the superimposition of images over an existing physical area. This is why I was asking the question.”

“You mean like that Pokémon Go craze that swept the nation for about fifteen seconds?”

Anna grinned. “Yes, precisely, Dr. Greer. I use Magic Mirror to run thousands of scenarios through a filter, comparing and contrasting which realities fit best. For example, I have run visual representations from all known historical time periods using archival images from a variety of sources. And I have found that only one closely matches the sophistication and level of technology we are seeing here.”

“And what’s that?”

“The second decade of the twentieth century. Already, the development of plastics, rubber and seemingly self-propelled vehicles warrants such a comparison. Of course, there is more work to be done and additional data is required in order to lay down a formal hypothesis.”

“I understand,” he said, curtly. In many ways, Jack lent tremendous weight to Anna’s opinion, no matter how difficult it might be to swallow. But like Dag, Jack felt a keen resistance welling inside him over the idea that a technologically advanced species might have existed at some point in the distant past.

There was no denying the evidence before them. This subterranean city had been locked in ice for millions of years. He couldn’t help but wonder what else might be hidden beneath Greenland’s ice sheet. Deep in our planet’s past, could this massive island have once been home to a lost civilization remembered only in our collective psyche as Atlantis? He caught Anna watching him intently. He considered sharing his thoughts, but was not sure the idle speculation would do any of them much good. Instead, he said, “I’m curious, what was it you based Magic Mirror on?”

“I am not certain I understand the question,” she said, a complicated expression clouding her digital features. “Are you suggesting that I infringed on an existing copyright?”

Jack laughed. “No, and I didn’t mean to freak you out. It’s only that humans run a very similar program to Magic Mirror. But we have a different name for it.”

“Looking Glass?” she asked, innocently.

“No. We call it imagination.”

Anna was still digesting Jack's comment when the street up ahead opened into a large plaza. In the center was a single ten-story circular structure, one that looked even older than the rest of the buildings they'd already come across. It rose a hundred feet into the air like a giant wedding cake, each layer slightly smaller than the last. The brickwork was exquisitely done, the outer surface consisting of a series of arches and columns.

"What do you make of it?" Gabby tossed out to no one in particular.

Grant cleared his throat. "It looks to me like the fabled Tower of Babel."

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"We got a set of footprints heading inside," Mullins warned. "There's no saying whether or not they're still here, but everyone should be prepared for possible contact just the same."

Jack and the others readied their weapons. Grant followed apprehensively, both his hands filled with the science gear.

Mullins lifted a hand, pulling them to a halt. "On second thought, get the robot to go in first," he ordered.

Jack brushed past the captain and toward the tower. "Her name is Anna. And the next time you can tell her yourself. It's the polite thing to do."

Anna looked at Mullins and stuck a digital tongue out at him.

After passing under the large archway, Jack found himself inside a circular hall with what might have once been a marble floor. The open space rose all the way up to a narrow ceiling. Ringing the hall were a series of ten-foot statues in various states of disrepair. From the light cast by Jack's helmet, whatever they were, they did not appear human. But it was the giant figure in the center that commanded the room. It stood close to thirty feet high, rising up on a pair of short but powerful back-jointed limbs. In one of its hands—if you could call it that—the figure was holding something large and oval, but from this distance Jack couldn't make out exactly what it was.

The figure's trunk was long and covered in what appeared to be fur. The neck was thickly muscled and came to a sudden stop. Jack then understood why. In a pile next to the statue sat the crumbled remains of what used to be the head, smashed beyond recognition.

Jack circled the room's centerpiece, noticing other details, namely the carving of vines crawling up the statue's legs.

"Anyone else think this place reminds them of Statuary Hall in the

Capitol Building?” Dag asked, coming up behind Jack.

Rajesh gasped. “Do you suppose this was what they looked like?”

The others trailed in, each staring with the same sense of awe. Most eyes were glued to the enormous statue in the center of the chamber.

“It looks like some kind of animal standing on its hind legs,” Grant observed, his eyes narrowed.

Gabby frowned. “Or a wolf, although the proportions aren’t in line with anything from the canine family. What do you think, Jack?”

“To be honest, my first thought is that it looks nothing like the Ateans.”

“Guess that rules out your colony idea,” Dag said flippantly, searching the statue’s square base for some kind of inscription.

“Not yet,” Jack replied, “but it certainly doesn’t help.”

Dag made it all the way around and sighed. “Wouldn’t you expect them to carve a few words into the stone?”

“You’re assuming that, like us, sight was their dominant sense,” Grant said. “Generally speaking, smell is the strongest sense among canines. For whales and dolphins it’s sound.”

“What Grant is saying,” Jack said, in way of interpretation, “is stop assuming that humans have a monopoly on doing things the right way.”

“I couldn’t have said it better,” Grant replied.

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A few feet away, Jack saw Tamura’s gaze locked on the structure’s high, narrow ceiling.

“You find something?” Jack asked.

“I’m not sure,” she replied, counting numbers under her breath. Her eyes slowly dropped to the main level. “I believe this tower is based on an upside-down Fibonacci sequence.”

“Excuse me?” he asked, as though she’d sworn at him in Latin.

Tamura blinked, her lips parted in deep thought. “Uh, yeah, it’s an integer sequence where every number is the sum of the two preceding digits. You see it everywhere from architecture and the stock market to the spiral arms of the Milky Way Galaxy. The progression goes like this: one, one, two, three, five, eight, thirteen, twenty-one, thirty-four.”

“Anna, did you catch that?” Jack inquired.

“I was listening, Dr. Greer, thank you,” Anna replied. “Tamura’s observation has also given me an idea for my work on decoding the genetic data Dr. Ward provided us.”

Jack grinned. “You mean Salzburg?”

“Correct. There is a link between the prime numbers we used to decode the binary signal inside the blast wave and a number in the Fibonacci sequence,” she informed him. “But please do not worry, the calculations will run in the background and will not disturb our present work. I will report back if there are any meaningful results, although I would not hold my breath.”

Jack and the others laughed. “Don’t worry, Anna. I’ll try to keep my expectations in check.”

“Right about now,” Gabby said, sidling up next to Jack, “I’m more interested in what that thing’s holding in its hand.” She was referring to the statue.

Jack stepped back to the edge of the room and used his optical head-mounted glasses to zoom in and take a high-resolution photograph. He then sent a copy to the entire team. It was only when the close-up was magnified that Jack noticed certain familiar details. “That what I think it is?”

A simultaneous thought occurred to all present who had been on board that alien ship in the Gulf, but it was Dag who was first to say it out loud. “Looks to me like he’s holding a pod.”

Chapter 29

“Has anyone seen the flight crew?” Eugene asked, his voice strained with fear. He had spun in a slow circle and failed to spot them.

“They went to scout ahead,” Mullins replied. “They even switched to another channel so they wouldn’t have to listen to all of your scientific gobbledegook. They don’t see the point in studying any of this dead stuff. Frankly, I tend to agree with them.”

Jack turned from the statue. “Haven’t you noticed the tracks we’re following seem to be going in circles? It’s as though they aren’t sure exactly what they’re looking for or where they need to go to find it.”

“And you do?” Mullins said, challenging him with outstretched arms, suggesting the current delay only bolstered his argument.

“I know whatever creature that statue is meant to represent is holding a piece of alien tech, which tells me we’re at least in the right neighborhood.”

Mullins raised his eyes and his helmet lamp until the stone object was brightly lit. “What kind of tech?”

Dag stopped what he was doing and piped in. “The kind used to seed a scarred planet with new life.”

“You read our report,” Jack said, his expression changing when Mullins failed to reply. “Didn’t you?”

Captain Mullins looked away. “Parts of it.”

“Well, did you catch the part where we jettisoned from the ship in one of those things?” Jack said, raising his voice in disbelief. “I don’t much like flying, but I can tell you, I was never so happy to be airborne in my life.”

“Dr. Greer,” Anna said, cutting into their argument from the far end of the chamber. “I believe you should see this.”

“What have you found?” he asked, heading toward her at a brisk pace.

“Have you had a moment to study the smaller statuettes?” she asked. Anna was talking about the ones ringing the inside wall of the chamber. As Dag had pointed out, they were arranged in much the same way the figures in Statuary Hall at the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. were set up. Except these weren’t white men in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century garb. They were creatures and only a handful of them were at all recognizable.

"There must be thirty or forty of these things," Gabby said, clearly feeling overwhelmed with the prospect of interpreting the secrets of a long-lost civilization while trying to stop a group of modern-day vandals from pillaging anything they deemed valuable.

"I can already see three sauropods and one theropod," Dag said, standing ten feet away before a different group of statues. "Given the people who built this place lived in close proximity to a land that was likely packed with dinosaurs, anatomically speaking, their depictions are pretty darn close to how we imagined them. But the raptors are by far the most interesting."

"Why's that?" Grant asked, moving over to him. When he arrived, he let out a quiet little sigh of surprise. "Oh, yes, the feathers."

"Feathers?" Mullins said, standing behind them.

"It was only in the last few years that paleontologists had begun finding evidence that at least some theropods had feathers. First with *Sinosauopteryx*, discovered in China in the '90s, and more recently a feathered *Coelurosaur* tail trapped in amber."

"Well, if they're so accurate with your beloved dinosaurs," Gabby said, "then please tell me what the hell this thing is?"

She was looking at a statue of a furless and naked humanoid creature. Its legs were somewhere between the length of a modern human's and that of a chimpanzee, except they were coiled beneath the creature. The animal's back was set at a forty-five-degree angle. It appeared to be a quadruped, which was to say it moved around on all fours, with the slightest hint of a tail. Upon closer examination, the facial features also appeared strange. It bore the enormous eyes of a lemur, with large ears and a tiny protruding nose.

"Whatever that is, it looks oddly human," Jack said, an unsettling feeling creeping into his bones.

"Maybe it was a pet," Eugene said, pointing at the chain. One end was secured around its neck, the other staked into the ground.

"I've just made a complete circuit," Dag told them. "And I only recognized about twenty percent of the animals depicted here. Here's the kicker, though. The recognizable ones are bang on."

"Therefore the other eighty percent are likely just as anatomically correct," Jack said, following Dag's thought. "So the question remains. What were these things?"

"Genetic experiments gone wrong?" Dag speculated.

The thought hung in the frigid air.

"This is some kind of museum," Grant said. "Certainly the answer

is in here somewhere.”

“Not a museum,” Tamura corrected the biologist, spearing the central statue within a cone of light. “This was a shrine. And they weren’t worshiping the giant in the statue. They were worshiping the pod.”

“On account of its advanced technology?” Grant asked, scraping a sample of stone.

“No,” she replied. “Because for them, the pods were the source of life on earth. Hence the diversity you see all around you.”

“Like Mother Nature, except with glowing buttons and exotic metals,” Dag exclaimed

“To them the pods were like seeds,” Jack said. “Hence the vines crawling up the main figure’s legs. This was their Parthenon. A tribute to the deity of life.”

“And death,” Gabby added, motioning several feet above the statues where weathered stone engravings appeared to show scenes of fire and destruction. As one made their way across the wide circular room, it was possible to piece together the basic threads of a terrifying story. First an object streaking through the sky, followed by a blinding flash and a torrential downpour of ash and burning embers. Another panel showed the sun being blotted out by thick clouds and the land engulfed in flames. Strange figures cowered. At an assembly, important decisions were made. The following panels showed a tunnel being excavated and masses of their people crowding into them.

“A meteor hit and they went underground,” Rajesh said after reaching the last panel.

“Not just any meteor,” Jack said. “They might not have known it at the time, but it was the same impact that killed the dinosaurs. The one, I suspect, that would eventually kill them, too.”

“Dr. Greer, that would imply this civilization was around sixty-five million years ago?” Anna asked, a note of surprise in her voice.

“It would, but they were not only around. I think they were thriving, perhaps without a care in the world. I might even go so far as to suggest they lived in something of a utopia. Until that second ship showed up and sealed their fate.”

“How many times have the Ateans wiped out life on this planet?” Eugene asked, reeling.

“How many major extinctions have there been?” Grant replied with a rhetorical question of his own.

“At least five,” Dag said, cupping the sides of his helmet in

disbelief. "I was sure the ship we found in the Gulf was a one-off."

Jack's mind went to the craft speeding through space at this very moment, set on a deadly collision course with Earth. Suddenly that dim, rather naïve hope they were coming to say hello crumbled, much like the head of the temple's main statue.

Just then the ground began to tremble, shaking the building and everything within it. A low hum, one that was all too familiar, filled Jack's ears. He found himself dropping to his knees. The others around him did the same and for a brief moment, they looked like acolytes, worshiping the divinity of the figures before them. Seconds later, the torture stopped and a blinding flash filled their eyes. It was only after that they heard the faint sound of cracking as massive chunks of ice came crashing down around them.

Chapter 30

Rome, Italy

Mia, Jansson and Ollie stepped out of a cab and stared up at the curved glass building before them. Situated on the northern outskirts of the city, Saint Andrea Hospital was part of Rome University, and should have been a thirty-minute taxi ride. Instead, with the highways jammed, it had taken close to two hours. A quick search of the hospital's website had given them both Dr. Antonio Putelli's email address and office number. He had answered on the first ring and Mia had done her best to cut to the chase without offending a man who seemed quite taken with social graces. She had noticed watching his television interview that ceremony and pomp were important and, as the old saying goes, when in Rome...

They headed inside, finding a chaotic environment. Doctors, nurses and orderlies rushed by in every direction, shouting, "*Scusami, scusami.*" The odor of antiseptic and dirty diapers filled the air. Patients packed the hallways, many of them children and the elderly. Like in many parts of the world, the ravages of Salzburg had simply overloaded the existing medical infrastructure. Unlike in Brazil, Mia knew there was nothing they could do for these people. Their only chance lay in figuring out what made Salzburg tick and then finding a safe way to end the havoc it was wreaking in the bodies of so many.

An elevator brought them to the sixth floor and the research wing. They exited to find Dr. Putelli speaking with a young lab technician.

When he was done, Mia and the others approached. "Glad to finally meet you," she said, offering her hand. Instead Dr. Putelli took her by the shoulders and kissed her forcefully on either cheek. He did the same to Jansson.

When he got to Ollie, the brash Australian whispered, "Kiss me and it's the last thing you'll ever do."

Dr. Putelli's eyes went wide before he burst into laughter and slapped Ollie on the shoulder. "This guy, I like. A real man's man." Putelli flexed his muscles to demonstrate the point.

Ollie nodded, as though Putelli's assessment were bang on. "Flattery will get you everywhere, my friend."

Another technician approached and asked the doctor a question in Italian. Dr. Putelli burst into an animated diatribe none of them could understand before bunching his fingers together and pressing them under his chin.

"Is something wrong?" Jansson asked, her forehead furrowed with concern. Ever since the riot in Kolkata, she'd been acting rather strange.

"Yes," Putelli said, annoyed. "Very wrong. The espresso machine stopped working again." He stared upward as though speaking to God. "I ask for so little, Lord, why do you punish me so?" A second later, he was back. "Okay, look, unless we go somewhere quiet, we will be interrupted every three seconds. Come to my office and I'll see what I can do to help you."

Dr. Putelli's office was about as slick as the man himself. An expensive antique desk and cabinet sat near a floor-to-ceiling window. The walls were filled with a range of diplomas, certificates and awards. The shelves also bore witness to his excellence with half a dozen gold and silver statuettes. The only thing missing from his collection was an Oscar.

"It was not easy getting here," Mia said as they each settled into plush seats, Dr. Putelli behind his polished desk, the others facing him.

"Lemmings," Putelli said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "They watch the news and believe everything they hear. I too would be panicking if I thought the world was coming to an end."

"I don't follow," Ollie said. "You don't believe we're in danger?"

"I know only what I see with my own two eyes," Putelli explained. "You turn on any television set and all they talk about is that the end is near, the end is near. An Atean space ship—or whatever they're calling them—will hit the earth in nine days and we're all gonna die. Maybe it's true. Maybe it's not. But you ask me to bet and I'm almost certain the story's been blown out of proportion by greedy *bastardis* out to get rich on the fears of peasants and stupid people. Did you know the EU and the United States have begun ushering a select few into Cold War bunkers they have retrofitted to last for years, perhaps even decades? There's even talk of a lottery for the few remaining spots. But this wouldn't be the first time fearmongering overcame reason." He leaned back in his comfy leather chair and tossed them a devilish smile. "Remember Y2K? They said the entire civilized world would soon come crashing down around us. Companies paid millions to fix what ended up being a complete waste of time and money."

"The Ateans are real," Mia told him, hardly a quaver in her voice. "I know because I was part of the team that studied one of their ships."

Dr. Putelli's forehead crinkled with interest. "The one near Mexico?"

Mia nodded. “It was the most exhilarating and terrifying experience of my life. Salzburg, however, is on an entirely different scale. Which is why we’re here. We’ve discovered that humans, along with a few dozen other species, now possess an extra fully functioning chromosome. Whenever one of those ships releases a flash of cosmic rays, it somehow adds new genes. When the Atean ship was destroyed, we thought it was over. But as you’ve seen, it’s since started up again and so have the added mutations. So yes, in nine days an impact may devastate the planet. But whatever devastation that unleashes, it will be Salzburg that finishes us off.”

“I see,” Dr. Putelli said slowly, interlacing his fingers. “Why, then, have you come to my hospital?”

“We believe a code is locked inside Salzburg, something the Ateans inserted. Each new gene that appears adds a puzzle piece.” She could see she was starting to lose him.

“What sort of code?”

“We’re not sure yet,” Mia said thoughtfully. “The most advanced artificial intelligence system in the world has been tasked with figuring that out. Our hope is that once it’s cracked, we may finally understand how to prevent the approaching mass extinction.” Mia paused and interlaced her fingers, mirroring Dr. Putelli. “Now, what can you tell us about the research you’re doing? On the news I heard you talk about catatonic Salzburg patients suddenly awakening and showing extraordinary cognitive abilities.”

“Yes,” Putelli said with pride. He swung around in his chair. “Come with me and I’ll show you.”

Dr. Putelli led them from the serenity of his office into the frantic world outside. They moved through a set of wide double doors, entering a long rectangular room that appeared to at one time have been an ICU ward. Now, instead of beds, tables had been set up. Patients ranging in age from seven to seventy sat opposite research assistants working out puzzles and answering questions. A little girl with bright red hair on Mia’s right was flipping through a Rubik’s Cube with a blindfold on. In a matter of seconds, she had solved it and laid it carefully on the table in front of her. Nearby, a middle-aged man with a generous potbelly was reciting the digits of Pi. Dr. Putelli said he was fifty thousand numbers in and could pause and start back up whenever he wanted.

“They may sound like savants,” Putelli told them. “But let me assure you, up until Salzburg, these were regular, everyday people. The little girl with the cube is a fourth-grade student with trouble in

mathematics, the older gentleman with the generous belly a bricklayer who couldn't even complete his own taxes. Most here were bedbound until the recent flash. If I was a religious man, I would swear we were witnessing a miracle."

A surge of hope sprang from somewhere deep within Mia. Several of these people were suffering from the same effects as her daughter Zoey. If they had spontaneously woken up, maybe she had too. The thought made the jabbing pain in Mia's heart over their separation all the more difficult to bear.

"Are all your patients like this?" Jansson asked, mesmerized.

"No," Putelli said, shaking his head. "I have patients at nearly every stage of the disorder."

Mia knelt down next to the young girl with the completed Rubik's Cube. Her arms were solid and well-defined, hardly the arms of a bedridden child. Scanning around, she noticed the others looked very much the same. And one other difference distinguished Dr. Putelli's patients and the ones she'd seen in India. "Do you have any before and after photos?"

"Surely we do," he said, pulling out his cell phone and swiping. He came to an image and winked. "Best you not see that one."

Ollie laughed. "I gotta say, this guy's starting to grow on me."

Dr. Putelli handed his phone to Mia. She swiped left, showing the others as she went.

"What do you see?" Jansson asked.

"Two days ago, these patients were visibly thinner with ruddy, translucent complexions. Looking at them now, they're far more solid with clear skin."

"Maybe they've been using Clearasil," Ollie quipped.

Mia slapped him on the shoulder. "I'm saying the genes in the 48th chromatid are behaving differently from the 47th. And it appears as though there's a clear progression from one symptom to the next."

"So with every flash," Jansson said, running with the thought, "patients with weak bones are suddenly bulking up. Others with sun-sensitive paper-thin skin are finally able to go outside."

Mia smiled. "And people with vocal and cognitive issues are waking up and doing extraordinary things."

"To what end?" Ollie asked, eyeing Mia. "How do we know the Ateans aren't slowly turning us into a bunch of bioengineered slaves to work mines that are too deep and inhospitable for them?"

“They may be,” Mia agreed. “Which is why I’ve been doing everything in my power to slow or stop the progression.” She turned to Dr. Putelli. “That brings me to the other reason we’re here. The hospital’s website says your background was in cellular communication.”

He nodded. “That’s correct.”

“If we all agree the genetic changes we’re seeing are triggered whenever there’s a flash,” she said, “the question remains, how are the cosmic rays able to send those genetic instructions to each cell in our bodies? At first, I thought it was co-opting the immune system, but now I’m not so sure.”

Dr. Putelli’s face scrunched up. “They aren’t. I mean, what you’re saying is not possible. Yes, cells communicate using chemical signals. Hormones and neurotransmitters signal transduction inside cells. You know this, but beyond that you risk bringing us into the weeds with wacky ideas like biophotons and extracellular communication.”

“Biophotons?” Mia said, taking Putelli by the hand. “I need everything you have on the subject.” She caught Ollie’s eye. “But first, I need your MRI machine.”

Chapter 31

Washington, D.C.

Kay pushed her way past the glass doors at the *Washington Post*, a singularity of purpose guiding her every step. A buzz of reporters, copyeditors, photographers and regular staffers crowded the lobby. During the paper's many years in print, it had witnessed dozens of crises and thousands of scandals. Each had driven readership and pushed the employees to fight for their seat at the table. But never had so much happened in such a narrow window of time. The Cuban Missile Crisis in the early '60s perhaps came the closest, and yet even that paled when compared to the flood of dramatic, newsworthy events unfolding on an hourly basis.

The message Kay had received from Lucas in IT had been tantalizingly vague. Nevertheless, it was more than enough to send her rushing back, even enough to risk the disappointment on her father's face at seeing her leave, and finally enough to weather the six National Guard checkpoints she needed to pass through in order to make it here. Kay hoped, for Lucas' sake, he hadn't been exaggerating.

As she reached the bank of elevators and pressed the down arrow, a voice called out from behind her. It was her friend and fellow Lifestyle reporter Sarah.

"Oh, my God, you will not believe where I'm going," she said, a pink glow creeping up her neckline. It created the impression she was wearing a flesh-colored turtleneck. An overweight photographer with disheveled hair and crooked glasses named Josh was running to catch up with her. Sarah was a firecracker, high on life and always eager for a challenge, no matter how meaningless.

"Looks like Trish finally gave you a decent story."

"I'm going to Sibley Memorial. You know how I hate hospitals, they totally give me the heebie-jeebies. I'm guessing you felt that flash earlier."

"How can anyone miss them? Besides, that's all I heard them talk about on the radio heading in."

"Apparently, there's this wing at Sibley dedicated to patients with Salzburg syndrome. A bunch of them can't move. They're just lying there."

Kay nodded, wondering where this was going.

"Then less than an hour after the flash, a few started speaking. Another hour passed and more were talking and the next thing the

doctor knows the whole ward's in a heated debate on like quantum physics or something.”

Kay lowered her chin. “Excuse me?”

“I spoke to the doctor over the phone,” Sarah said, searching for Josh and seeing he was right behind her. “They’re almost positive the light’s got something to do with it, but they haven’t got the foggiest idea how.”

“You finally got a story worthy of your genius,” Kay said, giving her a hug. “Go get ‘em, tiger!”

The grin on Sarah’s face looked like it wasn’t going anywhere for a very long time. She and Josh shot off at a brisk pace right as the elevator dinged.

Kay stepped on to the sound of her phone ringing. A handful of others got on after her. She glanced down to see who it was.

Incoming Call: Ramirez

“Oh, crap,” she shouted, jamming a hand between the open doors right as they were about to close. A few impatient sighs escaped those around her as Kay stepped off and took the call.

“Ramirez, are you still in India or have you dropped off the face of the damn earth?” she said, shaking her head as though he could sense her disapproval. “I tried calling you a billion times.”

“I only just saw the messages,” he said in a weakened voice.

“You okay? You don’t sound so good.”

“There was an incident in Kolkata,” he started to explain before stopping himself. “I can’t go into too much detail. Suffice it to say my partner, Agent Chalk, was killed. A mob came charging into the hospital where we were guarding that geneticist I told you about.”

“Dr. Mia Ward?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, Ramirez, I’m so sorry.”

“I spoke to his wife right before I called you. No two ways about it, that was by far the toughest thing I’ve ever had to do. Did you know his wife just found out she’s pregnant? And with twins no less.”

“I’m just glad you weren’t killed. The world is going steaming mad and if we don’t find a way of turning the heat down, the whole kettle’s gonna boil over.”

“Well, that’s part of why I’m calling. I passed along the info you sent me to that friend of mine I told you about, the one who’s pretty high up in the bureau. I explained the situation and he said he’d take

a look.” Ramirez paused. “Before I say any more, you can’t print or leak a word of this, got it? I need a solemn promise from you.”

Kay held up three fingers. “Scout’s honor.”

“Wait, you were never a scout.”

“I always wanted to be. But I swear, I won’t breathe a word of it.”

“A federal judge has just issued arrest warrants for the VP, the Speaker, the Secretary of State, President of the Senate and the Secretary of the Treasury.”

Kay leapt in the air with joy. “Ramirez, there’s a reason God kept you alive and now I know why. You’re a miracle worker.” A surge of euphoria was pouring out of her. Over at reception, Gail threw her a stern look. “When are they executing it?”

“Any moment now. Only problem is, that friend of mine has his own media contact and is giving his guy the official heads-up.”

“I’m okay not getting any more of the glory, Ramirez. I’m only glad we were able to prevent a bad man from being rewarded for doing the wrong thing.”

“Something to keep in mind. Charges don’t mean convictions. The country’s in uncharted territory right now, Kay. There’s never been a conspiracy this big in our country’s history. It’s possible the VP could beat the charges and get into office anyway.”

The elevator dinged again. “Listen, I hate to dine and dash, but I gotta meet with someone. You’re the best, Ramirez. Get well soon.”

Kay hung up, stepped onto the elevator and let out a deep sigh of relief. She could feel the weight melting off of her shoulders. As soon as those arrests were executed, the dangers of having a treasonous usurper and his band of conspirators calling the shots would be past them.

Down in IT, Lucas saw her coming and rose to meet her halfway. “I tried calling you before, but your phone was off.”

She glanced down and didn’t see any missed calls. “Maybe I was in a dead spot when you called. Why, what happened?”

“Two men from the FBI came and confiscated the laptop you dropped off.”

“Oh, crap! How did they know you had it?”

“Great question.” He rested a hand on his hip. “I was wondering the same thing myself.”

Kay rubbed her head. “Did you make a copy of the hard drive at least?”

Lucas tweaked a single eyebrow.

“Of course you did. What about the agents who paid you a visit? Did they ask you if you made a copy?”

This time the other eyebrow went up.

“And you lied and told them you didn’t, right?”

“When I say I love you, Kay, I hope now you see I really mean it.”

She cinched him into a firm hug. “I know you do. Now stop giving me a heart attack and show me what you found.”

He handed her a slip of paper with a GPS location.

“What’s this?”

“Whenever someone takes a picture on a smartphone,” he explained, “it records the GPS coordinates where that image was taken. It’s a feature that has to be turned off, but you’d be surprised how sometimes the simple things get overlooked by the smartest people. I remember once...”

“Tell me next time,” she cut him off. “Did you look the location up?”

“Hell, yeah.”

“And where does it lead?”

“Nowhere you would ever expect.”

Chapter 32

Greenland

After the barrage of falling ice had ceased, it became clear that some of the chunks were as big as a semi-detached home. The tower had not taken a direct hit, although the same could not be said for several of the ancient buildings in other parts of the city. At least two of the stone structures lining the plaza had been pulverized. Jack and the rest of the team had taken shelter inside the shrine, where they had listened to the booming sounds of impact and felt the tremors shake the very bones in their bodies. The only ones still unaccounted for were the aircrew—Steve, Natalie and Chris.

“If I gotta go,” Dag said, his features set, “I want a block of ice to drop right on my head.”

Rajesh’s face scrunched up. “But you won’t even know what hit you.”

Dag pointed at him. “Exactly!”

Eugene’s features were fraught with terror. “Would you stop? You’re gonna jinx us with all your death talk.”

Jack stood by the temple’s arched entrance, scanning the extent of the damage. “I just hope Steve and the others aren’t hurt. Any luck raising them?”

Mullins didn’t reply, but Jack knew a dark cloud over someone’s head when he saw one.

Grant pointed to the damage outside. “If we had any doubts before whether or not an Atean vessel was in the vicinity, I assume those doubts have now been silenced.”

Jack glanced over at the biologist and blinked. He switched the light from his helmet on, cupping it with his gloved hand. “Close your eyes a sec, will you? This may be a little bright.”

“What in heaven’s name are you on about?”

“Just do it.”

Grant obliged and Jack illuminated his features.

“Your skin’s smooth and unblemished,” he said in wonder.

“This is hardly the time to start complimenting each other’s complexion,” Dag said, digging in his pack for something to eat.

“There was a point back on the Orb,” Jack said, switching his light down to twenty percent strength, “where your skin was so ruddy I

worried you were either sick with the flu or having a heart attack.”

“Or drunk,” Grant said, through a disapproving look. “Gabby has accused me more than once of taking a nip at an inopportune time. I am British, after all. One of the perks is that you can hammer down a few quick ones and be no worse off for it.”

“This is not about your drinking,” Jack said. “You wanna have a sip here and there, what do I care? But what I’m seeing here is completely different. I’m saying I think your skin has healed.”

“You suppose it could have something to do with the recent blast?” Gabby asked, her voice still a little shaky from the recent scare.

“Most certainly it does,” Rajesh said, piping in. “If you recall on the Orb, Dr. Holland’s hip fracture occurred directly following a particularly violent gamma-ray burst.”

The link made Jack think of Mia. The last time they’d spoken, she had been on a plane heading for Kolkata. Although that had only been a handful of days ago, down here, three days might as well have been three years.

“Anna, is there any chance you can access a satellite from down here?”

She grimaced. “I’m afraid even with the boosters I have been planting, that might be a tall order. On the other hand, I do have news I would categorize as very good if not wonderful.”

“What is it?”

“I have detected a low-level signal at one hundred and twenty hertz. I believe it is coming from Aphrodite.”

“The drone?” Mullins said, sneering.

Anna threw him a look and brought her robotic arm down in a wide arc, her digits snapping three times. “Do not be throwing shade, girlfriend,” she said, her head bobbing from side to side.

Anger filled Captain Mullins’ face as the rest of them burst into laughter.

“That’s right, Anna,” Dag cheered her on. “Don’t let anyone diss your girl Aphrodite.”

Rajesh looked on in horror. “Anna, where did you learn that?”

Anna straightened. “I acquired the vocalization and movements from *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*.”

Jack’s belly spasmed with a burst of much-needed laughter. Fat tears ran from his eyes.

“Yeah, well, the next time that bucket of bolts insults me,” Mullins

said, speaking to all of them in general, but aiming his threat at Jack in particular, “I’m gonna put a bullet between its eyes. See how much laughing you do then.”

Jack knew there wasn’t any point responding. It would only make a bad situation worse. He also knew the emotional program Rajesh had detected within Anna’s neural network was magnifying the connection she felt to Aphrodite. For them, it was little more than a tool. For Anna, it was like a friend, perhaps even a child. Still, pulling the drone back online might give them a chance to survey the extent of the damage, check on the missing air crew and locate a group of killers.

When Mullins walked off, Anna moved in closer to the others. “I should let you know, following the last gamma-ray discharge, I was able to triangulate the source of the disturbance.” She fed a visual into each of their glasses. It showed a growing, spherical wave originating from the pyramid and pushing outward in all directions.

Jack finished watching and waved the animation away. “So either the pyramid is a ship or whatever’s creating the flashes is somewhere inside. Either way, we know now for sure which way we’re going. Let’s hope we’re the only ones.”

•••

Aphrodite’s aluminum and plastic frame had suffered a hairline fracture in her initial tumble, but otherwise she took to the sky with ease. The group repositioned to a collection of intact stone structures at the north end of the plaza. Since this was the way the flight crew had taken, it would cut down on the time needed to rendezvous once contact was reestablished.

Anna patched the feed from the drone’s camera into every member’s OHMD glasses. Together, they watched as it buzzed over the tops of buildings, giving the barest of glimpses into the roofless structures lining the city streets.

“Can you switch to infrared?” Jack asked.

“Affirmative,” Anna replied, doing as he suggested. From now on, heat would show up as orange blobs against the now-purple background. The only thing the camera couldn’t do was see through walls.

Aphrodite swept forward, reaching about a hundred yards ahead of them before Gabby shouted for Anna to stop and pull back. Since leaving the plaza, the entire image had shown little more than shades of purple. The drone hovered over a spot where three roads intersected. On one side was a large rounded building, surrounded by

a wall, a structure that had taken a direct hit from a piece of falling ice, collapsing part of the wall and showering the area with crystal shards. But that wasn't why Gabby had ordered Anna to stop. Alongside the wall lay three figures. The heat signatures from all three were barely present.

"You think that's them?" Captain Mullins asked, hesitating.

Jack checked the pistol on his hip and swung around the M4 strapped to his back. "We're about to find out."

"When someone yells fire in a theatre," Dag said with a nervous smile, "Jack's the only guy I know who rushes back inside."

"If that was me lying there," he snapped, "I'd hope you'd do the same."

Gabby stayed behind with Anna while the rest of the team pushed ahead to the intersection.

Jack wanted to believe it was the falling ice that had injured the figures in the street. Even if it was wiser to head in expecting the worst.

They followed the drone's blinking red light. Jack and Mullins were in the lead, pushing hard over the icy ground, at times struggling to keep their balance. Up until that point, they'd had the luxury of maintaining a regular pace. Now, facing the possibility their friends were up there, seriously wounded, all notion of moving at a safe speed had gone out the window.

A second before they arrived, Tamura appeared next to Jack, matching their brisk pace in spite of a recent wound to the shoulder. They were less than five yards away when Jack got a visual.

"I got three on the ground ahead of our position," he called out, chopping the air in front of him.

They arrived to a confusing scene. The three figures were indeed the air crew. Littering the ground around them were ice boulders ranging in size from basketballs to sofas. One particularly large piece was pinning Steve's legs beneath it. It was clear he was dead. The infrared had shown some remaining body heat in Natalie and Chris. Jack moved to the loadmaster, Grant dropping down by his side.

"What the bloody hell?" Grant exclaimed upon seeing the man's helmet.

It had been punctured by two tiny holes, the glass spider-webbing out from the points of impact.

Chris' biosuit was saturated with a large, frozen bloodstain over his chest.

“They weren’t killed by falling ice,” Jack shouted.

He barely had time to get the words out when a violent crack rang out, followed by another, knocking Aphrodite out of the sky. It tumbled to the ground, where it hit the stone wall next to them and shattered.

Jack tugged on Chris’ right arm, intending to throw him over one shoulder, but already his body was becoming rigid. He yanked again and rose up on a pair of wobbly legs. A shot buzzed in, striking the wounded man’s helmet. Both he and Jack fell to the ground.

Behind him, Tamura, still exposed in the street, jumped behind a collection of boulders. Carrying the air crew away was a guaranteed way to get themselves killed. Clearly, the people shooting at them would like nothing more.

Jack rolled the now-dead body off of his back and crawled over to a section of wall. Rounds zinged past his helmet, kicking up bursts of snow and puffs of stone dust. The same thing was happening to the others, spread all over the road.

“Can you see where they’re shooting from?” Jack shouted, peering over the edge. His eyes found Captain Mullins, his back against a large chunk of ice. Ahead of them, he saw how the road bent into a gentle curve, the perfect place for an ambush.

“One of the snipers is in the building at your twelve o’clock,” Mullins cried out, rounds keeping his head down. “Second-story. Left-hand window. If you can make your way around by hopping the compound wall, you may be able to sneak in from behind them. Grant and I will give you cover.”

“Dag, Tamura,” Jack said, fighting the rapidly diminishing moisture in his mouth. “Wait for the covering fire and stay on my six.”

Both of them nodded.

Mullins and Grant rose up, firing at the second-story window.

“Now!” Jack cried. He sprang to his feet and stormed across the compound’s open terrain. Tamura and Dag jumped over the section of wall nearest them and followed closely behind. Suddenly, the volume of fire increased as the ground at their feet exploded from incoming rounds. Jack hopped the northeast wall and dropped on his haunches waiting for the other two. From here, he could see onto another street which swung around and linked up just past where the air crew had been ambushed.

Up ahead, a darkened figure came into view. Jack rose. Seeing him, the figure skidded to a stop and leveled his weapon. Even from here, Jack could see he wasn’t in a biosuit. He wore a light-colored

parka, his head covered by a grey combat helmet. Over his eyes were a pair of ski goggles. Jack braced the stock into his shoulder and squeezed the trigger several times, riddling the man before him. His target dropped and didn't move.

A second later, Dag and Tamura showed up, the latter's eyes wide at the sight of the man Jack had just killed.

"The hell took you guys so long?" he said.

They moved west into a grouping of oddly shaped stone buildings. Jack motioned to an entrance before disappearing inside, the others close behind. He could hear short bursts of automatic fire coming from upstairs. He sprang up the stairs two and three at a time.

The sniper in the window had just finished reloading when Jack stepped into the tiny room. Jack aimed and pulled the trigger. Like before, he expected the weapon to vibrate in his hands, pushing back against his shoulder. Except this time all he heard was a click.

His eyes met the sniper's, whose own gaze flickered from surprise to amusement. The enemy's rifle rose up at about the same time that Tamura let out a primal scream, pushing Jack aside and firing two shots into the sniper's chest. He slumped forward, his eyes staring blankly ahead.

"Three of them just ran off," Captain Mullins called out from the street below. Dag leaned out the window aiming his M4, but there was no shot to be had. "You two all right?" Mullins followed up when he didn't hear back from Jack or Tamura.

Jack got to his feet slowly, rubbing his bruised behind. "I nearly bit the big one until Tamura here knocked some sense into me."

She smiled, and to Jack her angular features looked even more beautiful in the soft light. His mind flashed back to the man he'd killed and how quickly his own life had nearly been snuffed out. "Thank you," he said, taking Tamura's hand and squeezing it. "I owe you one."

Chapter 33

Rome

Mia glanced up from the research paper she was reading to find Ollie limping across the hospital cafeteria toward her.

“My gosh, did they neuter you?”

He flashed her a halfhearted grin. “I’m happy to report my manhood is intact. Apparently, Sentinel had inserted the tracking chip into my left arse cheek.” He rubbed his backside gently. “They also gave me this.” He produced a ten-inch burgundy-colored inner tube. Ollie laid it on the bench next to her and carefully settled onto it.

“They destroyed it, right?”

Ollie shook his head. “It was mine to smash and I took great pleasure in the act, thank you very much.” He happened to glance down at the paper she was reading. *“Biophotons & Biocommunication: Understanding the Language of Cells.* Wow, sounds riveting.”

“It is,” Mia said, excited. “Don’t laugh. I think we might be onto something here.”

Ollie read the name on the paper. “Roberto Rizzo. Never heard of him.”

She stopped and glanced around. “Neither had I. Would you believe I had to push for nearly twenty minutes before Dr. Putelli handed over Rizzo’s work? He kept trying to convince me to read his own papers on cell communication instead. I humored him, but Putelli’s stuff was more or less the same safe research that gets published all the time. Rizzo, on the other hand... I think the guy was a genius. I did a little searching online and found out Rizzo used to be Putelli’s research assistant. But when Rizzo’s work began taking him too far outside the mainstream, Putelli got uncomfortable and tried to undermine the guy.”

“Either Rizzo’s a whackjob or Putelli doesn’t like to share the spotlight,” Ollie observed, wincing as he shifted in his seat. He plucked the half-eaten donut from Mia’s plate and tossed it in his mouth.

“Our general understanding is that cells communicate via chemical signals. Instructions are sent out via hormones and neurotransmitters and picked up by cells using receptor proteins. Let’s take that donut you just stole to illustrate my point.”

Ollie swallowed, a guilty look spreading across his face.

“As soon as your pancreas detects you’ve eaten that donut, it releases a hormone called insulin into your system, instructing certain cells to start taking in the rush of glucose from your blood.” She smiled. “I hope you liked it.”

“It was delicious. My pancreas and I thank you.” He picked up Rizzo’s paper and flipped through it. “So how’s this guy and his biophoton theory any different?”

“Rizzo was actually continuing a line of research begun by a Soviet scientist in the forties, who found that the cells in our body produced a low-level radiance in the visible and ultraviolet frequencies. Think of the bioluminescence you see in fish and then imagine something infinitely weaker. Rizzo’s breakthrough was in hypothesizing that the light was one of the ways cells communicate with one another.”

“And you think those flashes of light are sending instructions to our cells via this biophotonics mumbo-jumbo?” Ollie asked, surprised he was grasping any of this.

“Precisely. You see, I thought the light was somehow co-opting the immune system in order to plant the artificial chromosomes into each cell. It wasn’t the most elegant way to go about it, but under certain conditions, it could work. What I see now is that the encoded light from the cosmic ray can do the same thing and so much faster. It does so by sending instructions to the cells all at once and allowing them to do the work. Think of a huge company like Amazon or General Motors. Both of them employ hundreds of thousands of workers, right? Now imagine the nightmare of having to hand each and every person a piece of paper every time you make a policy change. Then consider how much easier it is to send a single email to everyone in the company at once. In our example, the cosmic ray flashes are the email with the policy change and the cells in our bodies are the employees.”

“Then what about blokes like us who don’t have Salzburg?” Ollie asked.

“We aren’t affected,” she replied.

“Okay, fair enough. Now that we know that, how do we stop it?”

Mia’s lips curled into a thoughtful frown. She flipped through a pad of paper and stopped on one of the sketches she’d drawn.

“The heck’s this? Looks like a bunch of wavy lines.”

“It’s a magnetic field,” Mia replied, annoyed. “Cosmic rays hit our planet all the time, but we’re largely protected by a combination of earth’s magnetic field and the atmosphere. If we can produce a much smaller version of the former, say something that could fit in a bag or

hang from a belt, it might be able to shield people from the mutating effects of the light.”

“You’re a genius,” Ollie said, pulling her in until their lips met.

Mia was stunned.

“I-I’m sorry,” he stammered, wincing as he shifted away. “I didn’t mean it in a lecherous way.”

She tisked and winked at him. “That’s too bad.”

Chapter 34

Washington

Kay turned onto Kendal Street in Ivy City, a small industrial neighborhood northeast of Washington, and pulled to the side of the road. Soft early-morning light blanketed an otherwise bleak view. Low-income blockhouse apartments made up the bulk of the residential property here. The rest were run-down commercial buildings. To her right a storage locker business was surrounded by a ten-foot-high fence. On her left stood a red-brick two-story warehouse.

Lucas had been right when he told her the location was nowhere she would have guessed. “What on earth would the VP and Cabinet be doing meeting in a place like this?” she asked herself out loud. A quick double-check of the GPS coordinates confirmed she was at the right location. A school bus loaded with somber-looking kids roared past, blowing right through the stop sign at the next corner.

She pulled out her phone and took a picture of the warehouse. A sign above a metal shutter door read:

*Commercial Space Available
Industrial Realty
Call Aida El Hadri
202-794-2222*

She zoomed in and took a picture of that too. Afterward, she got out of the car and crossed a ratty-looking street, a patchwork of oil stains and half-assed patch jobs. The warehouse shutter door was closed and so Kay circled around back. If she wanted to find out what was going on inside, stepping in through the front entrance was probably the worst thing she could do. Secretaries were paid to act as buffers between their employer and anyone intending to bust the employer’s balls.

The moment Kay turned the corner she spotted an African-American woman about her height and weight cut through an empty parking lot and head for the warehouse’s back entrance.

“Excuse me,” Kay called out. “Excuse me, ma’am, do you work here?”

The woman had already opened the metal door by the time she turned to see Kay. She jerked with fear, as though Kay were about to pull a gun on her.

“Relax, lady, I’m not trying to hurt you. I just had a couple of questions I need to ask you.”

The woman tucked the bag she was carrying under her arms, lowered her head and disappeared inside.

Miffed, Kay broke into a run after her. The door opened easily enough, groaning slightly on a set of rusty hinges. Upon entering, she was greeted by a long corridor punctuated with doors on either side. She moved down it, peeking into each room as she passed. The first she came to was a dirty lunch room, outfitted with a table, chairs, kitchenette and an old-school coffee maker. Another was packed with fine-quality chairs and tables. A third room had racks of clothing.

Lots of strange stuff, but no mysterious woman. A single door faced her at the end of the long corridor. Kay opened it and found herself in a large open space. Cautiously, she went in, calling out to anyone who would listen that she was from the *Washington Post* and had a few questions. The floor sparkled, as though they had recently been mopped. By studying the footprints left in the drying water, she could see there had been a lot of activity here recently. Then in the center of the open area, Kay spotted bits of tape on the floor, as though someone had been measuring off a pre-designated area.

Above her, Kay noticed a separate office accessed by a set of stairs. Perhaps whoever was running the warehouse was up there. Running low on options, Kay headed up and paused at the top to survey the warehouse floor. From this new vantage point, she was able to see the form laid out by the tape. It appeared to measure about ten by twenty feet and to be in the shape of a large rectangle.

The office door was ajar and Kay pushed it open. At first glance, it appeared this new area would prove the least interesting of all. Multi-framed glass panels looked out over the warehouse. A pair of empty desks and roll chairs sat nearby.

Could this have been where the cabinet members met? Kay didn't think so. Something wasn't adding up. She spotted something on the floor, beneath one of the desks. Reaching down, she came up with a business card for Stanley Hollerman, Head of Research and Development at Gen Tech.

A quick search on her phone revealed that Gen Tech was in the video surveillance industry. But there was no telling how long that card had been there. New as it seemed, appearances could very well be deceiving. That was when Kay decided to do what every good reporter must when a lead grows cold. Make a phone call. In this case, to Stanley.

She keyed the number on the card and got a pleasant-sounding female voice.

"Stan, please," she said. She'd learned long ago to never use someone's full name. Asking for Stanley usually earned you a one-way trip to voicemail. Ask for Stan and make it sound like he'd been waiting ages for the call.

“May I ask who’s calling?”

Kay bit her lip.

“Hello?” the receptionist said.

“Tell him it’s Aida,” she said, recalling the commercial rental sign she’d seen outside.

“Aida?”

“Yeah, Aida El Hadri.”

A pregnant pause, which was quickly followed by, “Stan isn’t in at the moment. Can I put you through to his voicemail?”

“When are you expecting him?”

“I’m not sure,” the secretary replied, her starched, pleasant voice beginning to betray her annoyance.

“Thanks, I’ll try back later.”

Kay stood for a moment, staring at the card. She was about to leave when she got another bright idea. This time she dialed Aida, the commercial real-estate broker.

Two rings later—“This is Aida.”

“Hello, this is Glenda. I’m calling you from Gen Tech’s accounts receivables department. I wanted to make sure you haven’t cashed the check we gave you for the rental space on Kendal Street in Ivy City.”

“I don’t follow,” Aida replied in a thick Middle Eastern accent. “We cashed the check last week.”

“Oh, darn it. Yeah, Stan was supposed to have you wait on that.”

“Well, he never said nothing about waiting. He should have a copy of the short-term lease. The agreement makes it clear we cash the check right away. And for your information, I told Mr. Hollerman we don’t normally agree to anything less than six months. In your case, we made an exception.”

“An exception?”

“Yes, for two weeks.”

“Ah, yes, that was very kind of you,” Kay said, continuing the ruse. “So we still have another week on the lease then?”

“Eight days,” Aida corrected her. “After that, all your equipment must be removed from the premises.”

“Equipment?”

“I’m getting another call,” Aida snapped and hung up.

Why was a video surveillance firm renting the warehouse in order

to hatch a major conspiracy? Were they trying to keep things low-key or had they been lured there?

An important piece of a very strange puzzle was missing and Kay thought she knew who just might have it.

Chapter 35

Greenland

Following the enemy's retreat, the team left with the dead—both friend and foe—and set up a defensive position in a four-story building overlooking the plaza. Mullins had made a convincing case that the open space would provide an excellent field of fire should the enemy decide to attack. Two of them would remain on guard duty at all times, a responsibility they would rotate every hour.

Without a proper place to bury the dead, they put them in the building next door, laying them side by side. But first they collected weapons and searched the two enemy soldiers. It wasn't like Sentinel agents carried membership cards. But they did tend to have the next best thing: Tattoos. Mullins found one on each man after rolling up their sleeves.

"Huh."

"What'd you find?" Gabby asked. "Are they Sentinel special forces or what?"

"They're special forces all right," Mullins replied, his jaw cocked at an odd angle. "But not for Sentinel. They're Israeli."

Rajesh's lips parted with confusion. "We aren't at war with Israel."

"Not yet," Mullins confirmed. "Given the sorry state of the world, I think it's fair to say we may soon be."

"Clearly they're here to get their hands on what they couldn't back in the Gulf," Jack said. "And they may not be alone."

Gabby shook her head in disgust. "You'd think the world would come together given everything we're facing. I guess Ronald Reagan was wrong."

The group smiled, an expression with no small irony. Gabby had been referring to a speech Reagan had given before the United Nations in September of 1987 where he mused about how quickly human differences would vanish if our planet were facing an alien threat.

"Sentinel... Israel..." Grant said. "Does it matter who's against us? What's important is to consider what happens if any of these self-serving nations get their way. I've been thinking about things and I believe we only have two options. Find a piece of Atean technology we can use to call and tell them to leave us alone, or transform it into a weapon that can destroy them before they reach us."

"You sound like the vice-president," Jack said, recalling his rather

tense meeting in the Oval Office.

“But didn’t you say the government was moving people into bunkers?” Eugene said, hopeful. “We’re down here freezing our asses off while the rich guys are probably buying prime spots in huge underground resorts.”

“Consider how well that worked out for the people who lived here sixty-five million years ago,” Gabby said plainly. “You saw the panels they erected. Even as dust from the impact was blotting out the sun, they still took the time to make a record of what they were facing. Right now, these empty buildings are the sole monument to their existence. That’s what none of you seem to realize. This isn’t an archeological site. It’s a tomb and humans are now facing the very same dilemma and making the same dumb mistakes.”

Jack turned to Anna, who had remained unusually quiet. “What do you think we should do?”

“I believe it may not matter,” she replied with unusual darkness. “Either path will lead to destruction for most of the species on earth. That is a fact.”

“That was not what he asked you,” Rajesh snapped, stepping in, a worried expression blooming on his wide face.

Anna’s eyes dropped and she went to one of the openings where she stood, staring out at the plaza below.

“What’s wrong with her?” Dag asked, throwing a thumb over his shoulder.

“How would you feel,” Gabby said, “if your best friend was just killed?”

Jack caught sight of Tamura. She had also become quiet, her gaze a million miles away. Was she feeling the effects of having taken two lives in a few days? Or was something else the matter? The loss of friends she had known at the facility or the loss of her own humanity at having to avenge them?

...

After they had finished, Mullins and Dag decided to take first watch while Gabby, Tamura and Rajesh headed up to the third floor to catch some shuteye. One level below, Jack, Eugene and Grant sat on the cold stone floor, picking at MREs and sipping on water cold enough to numb the roofs of their mouths. With his helmet off, Jack could see thin fingers of steam rising up from the neck of his suit.

“What I wouldn’t give for a few sticks of wood to make a fire,” Eugene complained, rubbing his hands together with vigor.

Grant had no sympathy for the diminutive theoretical physicist. "If you're cold then turn the heat up in your biosuit."

"Turn it up?" Eugene said, sneering. "It's already at ten."

Jack shook his head, drawing in a lungful of cool air and watching a thick plume rush past his lips. He brought his fingers to his mouth as though he were holding a cigarette and repeated the action.

"You're playing a dangerous game, amigo," Grant said, noticing the momentary pleasure on Jack's face.

"Why is it the stuff we love the most is so bad for us?" Jack asked, resting his head against the wall behind him.

"Doesn't always start out that way," Grant told him. "I'm sure you didn't love the first cigarette you smoked, nor the first ice-cold beer you drank."

Eugene shivered. "Is there any chance, moving forward, we can avoid the words 'ice' or 'cold'?"

Jack smiled, his eyes closed. "I can still see the girl who got me hooked. Her name was Sandy, but people called her Sweet. She had long cornsilk hair that tumbled over her shoulders and danced in the sun whenever she swung her head. I met her when I was fourteen and out riding my dirt bike along the trails that cut through the rural town where I grew up. Those were the days before helmets and helicopter parenting, when the only rule was be back before sundown, if at all. About a mile past the nearest gas station, my tank ran dry. I suppose I saw the needle was low when I started out, but I was sure I could make it back before it got me into trouble."

"Pushing the limits," Grant said, smiling. "I suppose some things never change."

"No, I guess they don't," Jack said, staggering beneath the uneasy weight of Grant's comment. "Sweet had an open field behind her house and when I passed by, pushing my thirsty bike, I caught her standing by a stand of trees, sneaking one of her mom's cigarettes. She stamped it out right away, a guilty look all over that pretty face of hers. I knew her from school, but not that she smoked. She was one of those clean girls and yet in one fell swoop, that glittering reputation had been upended. She begged me not to say a word. I told her the truth. That I was more interested in getting some gas for my bike than I was in ratting her out."

"That's when Sweet's face lit up in a big old smile. Said her stepdad kept a can of gas in the shed. That he had it for the John Deere he liked to ride around the property on weekends and that she'd be willing to give me enough to get home, but on one condition. I had

to smoke a cigarette with her.

“At the time, I thought that hardly made much sense. I wasn’t a smoker and I could see she only had one left. Looking back, I later realized she was more interested in finding an accomplice than in hoarding her stash of smokes. I suppose in her mind, if we were both guilty, it lowered the chances I’d change my mind and turn her in. Anyway, I held up my end of the bargain and coughed my way through that first one. She did too and got me enough gas to get home.

“But days later, something in the back of my mind kept nagging at me. I wanted to see Sweet again and for the life of me I couldn’t figure out whether it was her pretty face I was after or another one of her mom’s cigarettes. She was pretty all right, but more than a dump truck full of trouble.

“We dated for a few years, even after I left and started working on rigs in the Gulf. Every second weekend, I’d come back to town and we’d head over to one of the Indian casinos that had just opened up. Which was how a sweet little girl introduced me to my second lifelong vice. One that nearly destroyed me.”

“She sounds awful,” Eugene said, transfixed.

“Quite the opposite,” Jack said. “She was terrific.”

“By awful, I meant to say a bad influence,” Eugene amended.

“The way I look at it,” Jack said, drumming his gloved fingers against the top of the helmet beside him, “the lure of addiction’s always been in me. If it wasn’t Sweet who got me hooked, it woulda happened some other way and with someone far less exciting.”

“That’s so much more romantic than my high-school experience,” Eugene said, frowning. “I grew up in Brooklyn and used to get chased by bullies every day after class. Then one day after second period, along comes this strapping kid named Bob—actually we called him Big Bob because he was built like a brick shithouse and never lifted a friggin’ weight in his life. Go figure. So Big Bob offers to protect me if I agree to pay him five bucks a day. Five bucks a day! Who did he think I was? I didn’t have five cents a day. But I agreed all the same, hopeful I’d figure something out before Bob realized I wasn’t good for it and decided to pummel me himself. A week later, I was going through a file cabinet in the basement of my house, looking for staples for a science project, and I find a stack of *Hustler* magazines. Must have been my dad’s secret stash. Right then and there a light went off in my head. I ran to the kitchen, grabbed a pair of scissors and cut out as many of those sexy pictures as I could. Don’t forget, this was before the internet. After that I sold ‘em every day at school for a quarter a

piece to a bunch of horny boys. After a month I had enough to hire two bodyguards and buy another twelve magazines.”

“You were like a drug dealer.” Jack laughed. “But instead of pot, you were selling porn.”

Eugene threw up his hands. “I was the son of Polish immigrants, born with a big fat ‘kick me’ sign on my back. I didn’t have much choice.”

The sound of Anna’s metallic footfalls clanked up from downstairs. “I hate to interrupt,” she said, turning to face them once she reached the top riser. “But I thought you should know the decryption protocol I have been running has arrived at a solution.”

“Which decryption is that?” Jack asked, sitting up straight.

“The 47th chromatid,” she replied, evenly.

“You mean Salzburg?” Grant nearly shouted.

Anna wobbled her head from side to side as she’d seen Rajesh do so often. “Not all of it, Dr. Holland. If you recall, Dr. Ward has only provided us with the DNA sequence for one half of the chromosome. In this case, the 47th chromatid. I expect when she returns I will be able to begin work on the 48th. ”

Something popped into Jack’s mind as Anna spoke. It was an image of the full Salzburg chromosome, the one they had found hidden inside the blast wave. At the time, the extra chromatid showing up in a third of the population had been labeled a disorder. Then once they realized there was more to come, Salzburg no longer represented a strange genetic anomaly, but a dramatic and purposeful shift in human evolution. Still, the question remained whether that shift was intended to help humanity or kill it from within.

“What led you to the solution?” Eugene asked.

Anna pivoted at the waist. “The credit for reducing the decryption time must go to Tamura.”

“It was her observation on the Fibonacci sequence in the temple, wasn’t it?” Jack said, rising and pushing the glasses up the bridge of his nose.

“Correct, Dr. Greer. After running through millions of possible links to that particular sequence of numbers, I discovered that by adding the first thirty-seven prime numbers, one arrives at the sum two thousand five hundred and eighty-four. That also happens to be the eighteenth Fibonacci number. I then multiplied eighteen by the key number of thirty-seven and arrived at six hundred and sixty-six.”

Grant gasped. “I’m not much for superstition, but isn’t that the sign

of the devil?"

Jack cocked an eyebrow.

"I am familiar with all of the world's religions," Anna replied without a hint of arrogance or pretension. "While the Book of Revelation does attribute six six six to the beast, those same three numbers are often utilized in several other contexts and often without any ill effect. In our particular case, six hundred and sixty-six also happens to be the thirty-seventh number in a triangular number sequence."

"Thirty-seven keeps popping up everywhere," Eugene said in wonder.

Anna seemed to contemplate this for a moment. "Given its importance, I suppose it would be strange if it did not. To make a long story short, I then applied the first thirty-seven numbers of the triangular sequence against the binary data from the 47th chromatid and proceeded to run it through the same bitmap application we utilized in deciphering the blast wave image."

"Okay," Jack said, holding the sides of his head. "You're starting to give me a headache again. Just show me what you found."

"Very well, Dr. Greer," she said, patching the image through to everyone's glasses.

Two separate pixelated images materialized before him. Jack flipped between them. The first appeared to be notched lines of varying length originating from a central point.

"Looks like an exploding star, if you ask me," Eugene observed.

They caught the sound of laughter on the channel. "It's a pulsar map," Gabby said, coming down the stairs and into the room where they were gathered. Tamura and Rajesh were not far behind.

"I may be the only one without eight PhDs," Tamura said, sheepishly. "So I might need someone to tell me what that is."

"In 1977," Gabby, the astrophysicist, explained, "NASA launched twin probes, Voyager One and Two, with the goal of mapping the solar system and someday reaching interstellar space. Each Voyager was outfitted with a golden record that contained key pieces of information about Earth. It also contained a pulsar map, a sort of guide to locating our planet within the Milky Way Galaxy. Pulsars are collapsed stars that give off intense bursts of high-energy particles at predictable rates. By identifying the pulse rate and the relative distance from a planet, you could not only show its location, but also when the probe was launched."

“Yes,” Eugene added. “That’s because as the positions of the pulsars relative to one another will change over time, so too will the pulse rate, but because the change is predictable, finding their locations in the past is simply a question of working the calculation in the opposite direction.”

Tamura stared intently at the 3D galactic map projected on the lens of her glasses. “So you’re saying the aliens encoded a map to their home world inside human DNA?”

“Not only human,” Grant said. “It’s inside any creature affected by Salzburg.”

Dag cackled with laughter. “Far out, isn’t it? And if you look at the second image, you can see a representation of the beings themselves.”

The image was crude, but the resemblance between the praying mantis people and the image decoded from Salzburg was uncanny.

“It’s like a watermark,” Gabby said, running her fingers through the hologram.

“Anna, any idea what planet they’re from?”

“Yes, Dr. Greer. The pulsar map leads to a planet in the constellation Sagittarius one hundred and fifty light years from Earth.”

The room grew eerily quiet. In the Star Trek series that distance represented about a twelve-day journey at warp nine. In real life, our fastest spacecraft would take forty thousand years to reach the closest star, Alpha Centauri, a measly four point three light years away.

“Why does that ring a bell?” Eugene asked, scratching a spot at the top of his head, now barren of hair. “It’s gonna bother me all day now.”

Gabby swiped the visuals before her off to the side. “It’s because of SETI’s famous Wow! signal. In 1977, radio astronomer Jerry Ehman recorded a strong, narrow-band radio signal far above background noise. They traced it back to the constellation Sagittarius, a hundred and fifty light years from Earth. Since then there’s been speculation the signal was nothing more than a passing comet, but given what we’ve just seen, I believe there’s certainly a strong case to be made that the signal wasn’t a case of mistaken identity at all.”

Still unencumbered by his helmet, Jack heard the sound of a distant rumble. At once, the thought of another blast wave being released chilled the blood in his veins. But there was something different about this new sound.

The brightness of Anna’s LED features lit up. “I am receiving a faint signal. It is incredibly garbled and difficult to comprehend.”

“Any chance you can clean it up?” Jack asked.

“Running filters and boosting,” Anna replied. Several tense minutes passed before she played the message.

“This is Admiral Stark. Northern Star is currently in the hands of Russian forces. Moments ago, two of our heavy transports were shot down on approach. If any of you made it down, be aware, you’re about to have company.”

“Transmission over,” Anna said, more than a hint of concern in her melodic voice.

“That’s just great,” Eugene said, rubbing his gloved hands on his knees. “Sandwiched between Russian and Israeli special forces. And what have we got? A bunch of nerds and a robot who’s more scared than we are.”

“Keep your cool,” Jack snapped. “We’ve got weapons and we’ve already killed two of their people. For now we keep pushing toward the pyramid and hope we get to whatever’s inside before they do.”

Chapter 36

Rome

“What the hell is that?” Jansson asked. The flesh around her eyes was dark while the rest of her normally tanned complexion looked pale and sickly.

“It’s an electromagnetic field generator,” Mia replied, flipping off the switch and killing the current on the crude-looking device. It seemed easy enough to build—a length of coiled copper wire hooked up to a car battery—and easier still to procure. The hospital’s connection to Sapienza University in Rome meant a single phone call from Dr. Putelli to the university’s physics department had secured one right away.

The hard part was convincing him that her theory on biophotons and Salzburg had a good chance of being right. He thought the idea was far too unorthodox and suggested she concentrate on the more traditional ways cells communicated. She had asked him whether the traditional method could account for the blast wave’s ability to alter DNA over great distances. Once he had finally acknowledged that it could not, he had agreed to make the call.

Mia’s plan was to place a subject with Salzburg within the magnetic field, wait for a blast and see if it mitigated the effects. If it did, then at least there was a way to potentially shield huge swaths of the population. The worst-case scenario was that the magnetic field would have little or no effect.

One thing both Mia and Dr. Putelli did agree on was the need to use a non-human test subject and to conduct the experiment in a closed wing of the hospital. Now devoid of anything but a rectangular folding table, this particular room on the seventh floor had once been an operating theater. The double doors swung open with a bang, revealing Ollie and one of Dr. Putelli’s assistants lugging a large metal cage containing one male pig. It oinked and looked around the room. Even though the creature weighed more than she did, Mia couldn’t help but find it cute.

Ollie and the assistant rolled the cage into place and lowered the handle. He stuck his finger between the bars. “Soon as we’re done with you, Daddy’s gonna have some bacon.”

Jansson glowered at him in horror.

“Ah, love. You should get some sleep. You look beat.”

Jansson ignored the comment. She waited until the assistant had

left. "I was going over the new genes we discovered in the 48th chromatid and found something you might find interesting."

"Does it have to do with biophotons?" Ollie asked, eager to join in.

"No," Jansson said, curtly. "It has to do with the *MRE11* gene responsible for repairing DNA."

Mia switched on the battery and listened as a dense hum filled the room. She then ushered them both out of the operating theater and into the hallway. "What about it?" Mia asked, wiping her hands on the lab coat she was wearing.

"Well, it turns out *MRE11* doesn't only repair some damaged DNA. It repairs about ninety-nine percent of any errors that occur during cell division or from exposure to environmental damage of any kind, including cuts."

The muscles in Mia's face went slack. "It has healing properties."

"Relatively rapid healing, I would say." Jansson rubbed at the corners of her eyes. "The gene also holds the potential for longer lifespans."

Mia kept her voice down. "Don't say anything to Dr. Putelli about this just yet, would you?"

The request surprised Jansson. "Why not?"

"Because when you start waving super-healing and longer lifespans in front of people's faces, they have a habit of losing sight of the big picture."

Jansson considered this, rubbing the back of her neck. "Between your biophotons and my findings on *MRE11*, I don't think Dr. Putelli is thrilled with us showing up and hijacking his research."

"Well, I'm not thrilled with getting snuffed off the planet," Mia replied. "I'm sorry to be a pain in his ass, but are we really gonna back down from searching for a solution because of social norms and bruised egos? We're not running a popularity contest."

A squeak escaped Jansson's lips. Her hand went to her face as her body convulsed in a fit of sobbing.

Mia moved in right away to console her. "Listen, I know that might have come out harshly and I'm sorry. We're all just under a lot of pressure."

"No, it's not that," Jansson said, pulling a tissue out of her pocket and running it across her nose. "I just don't think I can do it anymore. I've been trying to stay strong these past few days, but with everything that's happened I've realized I'm just not cut out for this." Her voice trailed off. "I spoke to my family last night and I think

hearing their voices just broke something inside of me.”

“I know how hard it is,” Mia said, thinking of her own family, of her daughter Zoey, at least. And just as quickly she had to steel herself from heading down the same dirt road Jansson was losing herself on.

“I don’t know how to say this, but I’m going home.” Jansson looked up at them, her eyes swollen. “I’m sorry.”

Mia was speechless. She was prepared to do a little bucking up. Whatever it took to get Jansson’s head back in the game. But she hadn’t been ready for this. “Are you sure you’re making the right decision?” she heard herself ask from a great distance.

Jansson nodded and hugged them both, before turning on her heels and shuffling down the long corridor and out of sight.

When she was gone, Ollie appeared and put an arm around Mia, squeezing her tight. “You can’t blame the poor gal,” he said, a lump in his throat. “We’re all a bunch of eggs really. Some of us just happen to be hard-boiled.”

Chapter 37

Bethesda, Maryland

Kay slouched down in the driver's seat of her Corolla until only her eyes and the top of her head were visible. She was parked on Exeter Road, a sleepy, tree-lined street in a bucolic neighborhood of Bethesda.

Across from her sat an expensive-looking, two-story red-brick house with a gabled portico entrance and a well-kept lawn. The sun had gone down two hours ago and she was waiting for the owner of the aforementioned house to get in his car and drive away. Five minutes ago, he'd come out to do just that only to disappear back inside.

Kay had realized rather quickly that finding out what had gone down in that warehouse was a trail that led directly to Stanley Hollerman, the name on the business card. While Lucas had reluctantly agreed to help her find an address for her target, it was now her turn to perform another kind of break-in.

In the background, the radio crackled with Whitney Houston's *One Moment in Time*.

"We interrupt the regular programming to bring you some breaking news. Secretary of Defense Ford Myers has just been sworn in as acting president of the United States. The former Secretary assumes the role amid one of the most stunning and disturbing crises in American political history: the attempted assassination of a sitting president by the senior members of his own cabinet. A surveillance video suggesting the full extent of the conspiracy was leaked to senior *Washington Post* reporter Kay Mahoro..."

"Senior, my ass," Kay said.

Just then, the front door to the house swung open and out came Hollerman, dressed in shorts, t-shirt and a headband. He had a dog with him, a shaggy white and grey thing that bore a disturbing resemblance to Sprocket from *Fraggle Rock*. When the two work-out buddies turned the corner, Kay sprang from the car and headed straight for the front door. She hadn't seen him lock it. But when her fingers closed around the handle, she felt immediate resistance.

Damn.

Kay circled around back. Hollerman didn't appear to be in the best shape of his life, which meant he probably was not going to be gone very long. She quickly tried two windows and found those locked as

well. Then she spotted a sliding glass door at the far end of the property. Once there, she pushed and felt the door give way. Stepping inside, Kay became distinctly aware that her heart was thudding violently in her chest. She'd never done anything like this before. Jaywalking and rolling through stop signs was one thing. She'd never broken any kind of law. Not the important ones, at least.

The house was cluttered with a ton of gaudy antique furniture. In the hallway and living room, she spotted at least three glass cabinets filled with porcelain figurines. Every room had eighteenth-century style sofas, the kind with carved lion's feet. In other words, Hollerman had strange taste.

Kay was looking for a home office. Surely even a guy with no taste had to bring his work home with him sometimes. She went upstairs, tip-toeing up each riser one at a time. He'd apparently inherited the house from his late mother three years ago. Another tidbit she'd gathered from the legal papers he'd filed online.

From the top riser, Kay found a small office overlooking the street. A laminated eighteenth-century desk by the window housed a laptop and speakers. On the shelf next to the desk was a box of tissues and hand lotion.

If the world wasn't about to end I'd say this guy needs a girlfriend in the worst kind of way.

As soon as she opened the laptop cover, it asked her for a password. She was in the process of cursing when she spotted the manila folder resting on top of the printer.

Kay picked it up and started browsing. The photographs inside had names written on the back. The first shot was of a ruggedly handsome white man with weathered skin, named Ollie Cooper. Next was the woman Ramirez had been protecting, Dr. Mia Ward. Both of them had a file featuring key pieces of information. Where they lived. Where they worked. Then somewhere at the bottom in bold letters were the words. *Current Location: Rome, Italy.*

Kay continued flipping and came to an image of a woman she recognized. Leslie Fisher, an investigative reporter with the *Washington Tribune*. Here as well Kay found a list of pertinent information they'd collected on Leslie. But it was the final group of images that caught the breath in her throat. Photos of Kay, and in all of them she was lying unconscious. In a handful, she'd even been propped up by a pair of strong hands while someone snapped close-ups.

"When the hell were these taken?" she said, out loud, her pulse racing wildly.

The thought had no sooner taken form than it was followed by another. Could this have been from the day of her attack? The day she had disappeared for several hours, only to reemerge in a nearby park, groggy and confused.

The sound of barking outside drew her attention to the window.

Oh, shit!

Hollerman was there with his dog and thankfully the darn thing was going after a squirrel that had darted up a tree. Pulling on his leash, Hollerman struggled to draw the dog back toward the house.

Kay's eyes fell to the laptop. Panic clawing at the back of her throat, she reached under the desk, yanked the plug out of the power bar and scooped the computer up in her hands. In a few strides she was down the hallway. She'd barely reached the bottom stair when she heard the key slide into the lock on the front door. She tore around the corner and headed through the living room back toward the glass door right as he came inside. At once Sprocket, or whatever his name was, tore free, barking madly. Kay reached the glass door and started to close it behind her when the dog appeared. For a moment their eyes met and suddenly he no longer seemed cuddly and cute. Suddenly he seemed far more like a killer who wanted nothing more than to sink a pair of long, sharp teeth into any part of her body he could.

With a final heave, she closed the door and took off running through the backyard. In her manic state, she felt a few of the photographs slip from the folder and fall to the concrete patio. A voice screamed out for her to stop and grab them, but the back sliding door was opening again and she knew they were gone. With the dog barking after her, Kay bolted along the side of the house and across the street, certain she must have broken the ten-meter record. Once in her car, she started the engine and floored it, right as Sprocket came charging in. Lucky for her, the only thing he got to chew on was the exhaust from Kay's tailpipe.

Kay was barely a block from the highway when she opened the window to let the wind cool her face. The underarms of her shirt were soaked with perspiration. Sweat was beaded on her forehead and along her upper lip. She imagined the story in the local paper the next day and couldn't help but laugh.

Black woman steals laptop and flees with dog in hot pursuit.

...

One hour and three National Guard checkpoints later, Kay arrived at the *Washington Post* head office.

She set the laptop on Lucas' desk and clasped her hands. "I know you wanna kill me, but I swear, this'll be the last favor I ever ask of you."

He waved his hand in the air dismissively. "You're dead to me."

"Lucas, you don't understand. What I found is bigger and more personal than you think."

The IT director raised his arm as high as it would go and moved it up and down. "Buh-bye."

Gritting her teeth, Kay reached into the folder, pulled out pictures and slammed them on his desk. "These are the assholes who kidnapped me six months ago."

Lucas tried not to look, but couldn't help himself. Slowly the indignant expression on his face began to waver.

She set her index finger on the cover of the laptop and pressed down. "Something's going on and it's a hell of a lot bigger than I thought. If figuring it out means busting into this guy's laptop, then so be it."

Lucas threw her a humorless smile. "I'll have something for you by tomorrow."

"That's fine," Kay said, glancing down at the picture of investigative reporter Leslie Fisher. "There's someone I need to talk to first."

Chapter 38

Greenland

With news that Russians might be descending into the cavern to pursue them, the group left the relative security of the plaza and continued toward the pyramid. Although it was nearly impossible to make out in the relative darkness, still images Anna had sewn together from Aphrodite's final flight helped point them in the right direction.

With clear and present dangers coming in from every possible direction, Captain Mullins took charge of their tactical formation. First off, everyone would carry a weapon, including Grant, and they would walk in two lines, each pressed against opposite sides of the street. From here they could monitor anyone in the upper stories attempting to ambush them.

Hand signals were next. An arm at a right angle with a clenched fist meant stop. A hand patting the air horizontally meant get down. The rest were fairly straightforward. Given everyone's lack of combat training, Jack was sure Mullins hated that he and Tamura were the only military left. But as the saying went, you don't always get what you want.

Jack was lifting his eyes to check passing windows when something thudded into the wall above his helmet, spraying out a puff of stone and ice. He dropped to the ground, ordering the others to do the same. He scanned for threats without finding any. More shots rang out, riddling the ground and the buildings nearby. Mullins tossed up a hand signal and they cut through an alley on their left, intending to move around the nest of snipers firing at them.

In seconds, they emerged onto a parallel street heading once again toward the pyramid. They got less than fifty feet before a fresh volley of fire peppered their position. A bullet dinged off the top of Dag's helmet, throwing out a burst of sparks. He reeled back, cursing like a sailor and thanking God somehow all at the same time.

When they tried to snake around again and encountered the same stubborn resistance, Jack suggested they stop and reevaluate their next move.

Rajesh and Tamura set up a defensive perimeter while the others conferred with one another.

"These guys know we're heading to the same place they are and have probably blocked as many approaches as they can," Jack told them, kneeling.

"That's certainly what I would do," Mullins admitted. "Problem is we still don't understand their endgame. Have they come to stop us from getting to the pyramid or are they simply keeping us busy until someone else shows up?"

"The Russians?" Gabby said.

"You think the two of them are in cahoots?" Dag asked, rubbing the top of his helmet with his bare hand.

"Crazier things have happened," Eugene said, scanning over his shoulder every two seconds, perhaps expecting someone to jump out at him through the gloom.

"These lights are also giving us away," Jack told them.

"You wanna stumble around in the dark?" Eugene said, horrified.

"No, not in the dark. I suggest we kill the lights and use the infrared built into our glasses."

Mullins shook his head. "That's not a bad idea. I just worry we'll be at a disadvantage if we get into a real firefight."

"Maybe not," Jack replied. "What are the chances the Israeli forces are using nightvision?"

"I'd say a hundred percent."

"Well, if we move up in the dark and switch our lights on once we're close, it might blind them."

Mullins considered this. "Or it might just get us killed. But fine. Everyone go to infrared and be ready to switch back if we get into trouble."

They set off again, this time cutting an even wider circle around their current position. There was no telling how strung out the Israeli perimeter was. Soon enough they would find out. Staring out at the world through the infrared spectrum made everything ahead appear dark blue and without the slightest hint of oranges or reds. Just then, Jack felt a vibration come and go. Seconds passed before he felt it again.

"Any of you getting this?"

"I am," Grant said. "I can feel my insides shaking."

This was no blast wave building up. This was different. Sudden and sporadic. A larger vibration struck just then and Jack caught the distant sound of something cracking.

His eyes panned up to the cavern's enormous ceiling, looming over them like a closed fist. From that height, a single boulder would signal a veritable death sentence. Then more vibrations came and, of all

things, snowflakes. Jack held out his hand, watching the white specks gather in the palm of his glove.

“Anna,” Jack asked, “are you intercepting any radio signals topside?”

“Not at the moment, although I have analyzed the origin of the shockwaves you are sensing and they appear to be coming from the surface.”

For a moment, Jack was puzzled, until understanding took shape in his mind. “I think the cavalry’s just arrived.”

Gabby looked at him. “Admiral Stark?”

“I hope to hell it is,” he replied. “If so I hope America’s teaching those Ruskies a lesson.”

Then Jack detected another kind of vibration.

“Dr. Greer,” Anna said, jogging over to him.

“I know,” he shot back, his eyes closing against the building pressure in his head. This newest blast wave propelled Jack and the others to the ground, some of them crying out in pain. When the flash came a moment later, Jack felt an electric current surge through his body. Inhaling deeply, he was about to tell them to find somewhere safe to hide when his world erupted in an explosion of white before turning inky black.

Chapter 39

Rome

Mia was sequencing the genome of a twenty-year-old woman named Caterina when her vision was filled with a flash of bright and blinding light.

After awakening from a vegetative state, Caterina had begun demonstrating a range of remarkable mental abilities. When the results finally came through, Mia hoped they would reveal at least three of the four new dominant Salzburg genes.

But the sudden flash had sent her mind reeling toward the experiment they had set up in the old operating theater on the seventh floor. Had the magnetic field generator been able to block some or all of the genetic instructions sent via the cosmic blast?

She glanced over at the timer on the sequencer, saw there was still nearly thirty minutes remaining before it was complete and sprang from her stool.

A few minutes later, Mia was exiting the elevator and striding down the long corridor, the tails of her lab coat fluttering. Ahead, she could see a few of the lab assistants and technicians had arrived. Among them was Dr. Putelli.

As she drew closer, Mia also caught the strange expressions on their faces. She pushed past a group of lab assistants and technicians gathered by the door and moved inside. The pig was dead, lying inside the cage with its tongue sticking out.

Mia sank down onto her haunches and buried her head in her hands. Dr. Putelli switched off the magnetic field generator and braced himself over the cage.

“I didn’t think it would work,” he told her. “But I suppose it was worth a shot. Try not to be discouraged, Mia. This is what science is about. Trial and error.”

She wanted to cry but swore and slammed her fist against the ground.

“It’s only a pig,” he said, continuing his not-so-smooth attempt at assuaging her obvious feelings of frustration and guilt. “Be thankful I didn’t let you talk me into using a human subject. Perhaps now we can get back to a more reasonable approach.” He flashed a toothy grin, but she was in no mood.

“I’m pissed off it didn’t work the way I hoped it would,” she said,

rising. “But I don’t consider it a failure.”

“You don’t?” The inflection of surprise in his voice was unmistakable.

“Absolutely not. Clearly, the magnetic field failed to shield the pig from all of the incoming cosmic rays. We’ll have to look further at how much it did manage to block, but in the end, the percentage doesn’t really matter. The earth is protected by such a field and it helps by and large to shield us from the deadly cosmic rays that constantly bombard our planet. I postulated that the blast waves were sending genetic instructions via the same biophotonic language our cells utilize. If that hypothesis was wrong, the magnetic field would have had no effect.”

Dr. Putelli hunched over the dead pig’s cage, blinking stupidly.

A moment later, Ollie skidded to a stop. “Oh, crap.” He found Mia, who filled him in.

“I was just speaking with a fifty-seven-year-old pregnant woman,” he told her.

Mia’s eyebrows shot up. “Wow, fifty-seven.” She turned to Putelli. “Is that normal around here?”

He shook his head, still in a daze. “No more than anywhere else.”

“But that wasn’t the really weird part, if you can believe it. She’s a subject in Dr. Putelli’s Salzburg study and says she’s expecting twins.”

The study in Kolkata had seen a rash of twin pregnancies among women with Salzburg that was way off the chart as well. She asked Dr. Putelli if he’d noticed the same correlation.

“Oh, yes, there have been many. Some who even had Salzburg and gave birth before we knew what it was. Although I’m afraid there may be dangers we never anticipated among twins born with the disorder.”

Mia’s head tilted. “I don’t understand.”

“Psychotic breaks with reality. Schizophrenia. I have seen more than my fair share of cases. We have tried our best to treat them, but often there is little we can do. In fact, the day you arrived, a pair of twin girls, no more than ten years of age, lost touch with reality and had to be sedated. It was quite ugly and frightening for the other patients, I’m afraid.”

“There’s a fine line between genius and stark raving lunatic,” Ollie said. “Haven’t you lot considered for a moment these changes might be pushing our brains further and harder than they were ever meant to go?”

Mia was terrified Ollie just might be right. Could the end point for

the thirty percent suffering with Salzburg be a slow, painful descent into madness? There was only one way to know for sure. She looked at Dr. Putelli. “Do you still have a sample of the girls’ blood?”

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Ten minutes later, Dr. Putelli entered the lab, holding the twins’ blood samples. “I hope I’m not disturbing you,” he said with a halfhearted smile.

“I was going over Caterina’s sequence. When the flash hit I dropped everything and rushed up to check on the pig.”

“And?” he said, glancing over her shoulder. “Any new findings?”

“Caterina has seven of the eight Salzburg genes. The three located in the 48th chromatid are *LRP5*, *SOD11A* and *MRE11*. Of course, in the average population one half of each chromosome is donated by the mother and one half by the father. But in Salzburg’s case, there is no contributing parent. We’re seeing empty sections of the chromosome slowly being populated by genes and other genetic material via biophotonics.”

“Triggered, as you say, by those blinding pulses of light,” Putelli added.

“Exactly! That’s why I went to India and then came here. I’ve been chasing the emergence of new genes, with the hope that by sequencing them, we might figure how and why this is happening.”

Dr. Putelli considered this. “If we do nothing, I worry that society will diverge into two genetically-distinct groups. Those with Salzburg and those without.”

“There are simply too many variables right now to give any real thought to the future. Could it be that the final stage of Salzburg is to drive its host insane? And will any of that really matter if life on earth is threatened by what they’re now calling the doomsday ship?”

He smiled coyly. “You know how I feel about the chances of that ship being real.” He went to hand her the blood samples and pulled them away at the last second. “Dr. Ward, there is one thing I want to make clear. When all of this is over, I don’t want you getting any ideas.”

Mia was genuinely confused by his comment. “Ideas about what?”

“I spoke with the people at the U.S. State Department and they’ve vouched for you,” he said, peering up beneath hooded slits. “In fact, they were happy to hear you were still alive.”

“There was a riot in Kolkata and people in our party got killed. We had to flee.”

"Kolkata isn't the only place in trouble," he said. "Seems the whole world is in conflict. Your country in particular. First with Cuba over its artificial islands and now with the Russians in Greenland."

Mia went pale. "Greenland?" It was hardly a surprise, but she had been so unilaterally focused on her work here, she had lost touch with the rest of the world.

"The start of a proxy war, I'm afraid," Dr. Putelli said. "At least that's what they were saying on CNN. I try not to put much weight into any one news outlet. But if there is a conflict going on, I only hope it doesn't escalate into a full-scale nuclear war."

That last part made her insides feel like they were being slowly fed into an organ grinder. In the brief time she had spent in the Gulf investigating the Atean ship, Mia had grown close to many of the scientists: Gabby, Dag, Grant, Rajesh, Eugene and Anna. Her heart ached with the idea that any of them might be hurt or worse. It was Jack's handsome face that kept coming back to her.

"You have friends up there?"

She nodded, unable to speak.

Dr. Putelli set the blood samples down on the table and put a hand over hers. "I'm sure they'll be fine."

He was about to leave, but Mia called after him. "I still don't understand what you meant about me getting any ideas."

The doctor fished something from between his teeth with the tip of his tongue. "There's something you must understand, Dr. Ward. Over here, things are different than they are in America. Men know their place and so do women. I simply want you to remember that you and Ollie are here as my guests."

"Have we done something wrong?"

Dr. Putelli drew in a ragged breath. She could tell he had hoped she might get the hint. But Mia wasn't a hint kinda gal. If someone had something to say, they ought to come right out and say it.

"Look," he said. "You're a very accomplished scientist and in the short time you've been here we've made some significant leaps in our understanding. It's just sometimes your brash manner can rub people the wrong way."

She couldn't help but laugh. "You know, it may surprise you to hear this, but I wasn't always this way. There was a time not so long ago when a man in very much the same position you're in took advantage of me in a way he never should have. When I threatened to speak out, he ruined my life and I've been struggling back from the

ash heap ever since.

“I learned very quickly to either lie down and give up or fight for what I believe in. Every day since then I’ve been tested in ways I never thought possible. Show me a man with a brash manner and I’ll show you someone who’s respected and revered. It’s too bad all you see when you look at me is a woman, rather than a member of a team working toward the same goal.

“If it’s awards and accolades you’re worried about, you can have them. All I want is for my six-year-old daughter to have a chance at a normal, happy life and maybe, just maybe, for her to one day look back at what I did and feel pride that her mom had the guts to stand up and speak her truth when everyone else was telling her to sit down and shut up.”

Dr. Putelli stood stunned. Maybe he’d expected her to slap him across the face or rant and rave and burst into tears. Whatever thoughts were going through his mind, they were likely travelling along uncharted neural pathways. She kept quiet and watched him turn and hurry from the lab. It often took strength to find a voice and speak up. Just the same, it often took wisdom to know when your point was already made.

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When Mia had finished sequencing and analyzing the DNA in the twins’ Salzburg chromosome, she gathered everyone together in the lab in order to share the findings. Dr. Putelli stood before her, arms crossed, a hard look on his face. A few technicians and assistants were present, as well as Ollie.

Mia held up the blood vials. “These two young girls represent the first known cases of patients with the entire Salzburg chromosome. We’ve already seen the devastating effects the genes in the 47th chromatid produced. *LRP5* weakened our bones; *TRPP2* made us hide from the sun; *DAF4* weakened our immune system, aging some patients prematurely; and *SER3* was responsible for the comatose state so many are experiencing, including my own daughter.

“The four genes from the 48th chromatid are vastly different and in many cases, behave in ways that are downright astonishing. Some we’ve already come to know well. Like the gene *LRP5*, which encodes a protein that greatly increases bone density; *SOD11A* and the powerful protein Dsup, incredibly helpful in shielding us from radiation; *MRE11*, which repairs errors in our DNA; and finally, *HOK3*, perhaps the most mysterious of them all. Far more testing remains to be done, but here’s what we know about it so far. The gene seems to affect the parahippocampal gyrus in the cerebral cortex.”

Ollie's weathered face looked blank.

"Uh, that is to say," she explained for him in particular, "the region of the brain that surrounds the hippocampus and is responsible for memory and visuospatial processing. Asymmetries in this area are sometimes associated with schizophrenia, which may explain the symptoms Dr. Putelli observed in the girls. *HOK3* is the least understood of Salzburg's genes. That also makes it potentially the most dangerous. If schizophrenia is the final stage for billions of people on earth, we need to know and we need to know now. Which brings me to my next question." She fixed Dr. Putelli with a determined stare. "Where are the twins now?"

He looked up. "They were taken to a facility in Rome for psychiatric evaluation."

"What's the name of the hospital?" she asked.

Dr. Putelli bobbed his head with indecision. "It's not a hospital. It's a mental health facility."

"You sent them to an asylum?" Ollie snapped.

Dr. Putelli didn't respond.

Mia caught Ollie's eye. "You up for a cab ride?"

"With you? Any day."

"Unfortunately, your chances of getting a cab in Rome right now are next to nil," Dr. Putelli told them. "Ever since the civil unrest and the labor shortage, even public transportation has been drastically reduced."

"Will you come with us then?"

He waved his hands in front of him apologetically. "I don't have such an easy time in those places."

Mia threw him a look. "Then can we borrow your car?"

Chapter 40

Washington, D.C.

Kay slid the picture across the table, pushing it into Leslie Fisher's line of sight. The investigative reporter glared down at it, biting her lower lip with all the frenetic grace of a squirrel eating an acorn. Kay turned and scanned the handful of patrons inside the coffee shop.

The air was thick with the smell of exotic coffee. International blends were what La Colombe on 1st and 6th was known for. Leslie was sipping on the Brazilian while Kay had opted for the Ethiopian. They were less than a mile east of the White House, which explained the increased military presence. Outside, the noonday sun was in full effect. But with every passing day the streets were becoming more and more deserted. Perhaps it had something to do with the soldiers stationed outside grocery stores, gas stations and banks. The government had started issuing ration cards to families via their smartphones. The first few hours after news broke that the ship was on its way, people had tried to stockpile as much food and supplies as they could. But hoarding was only going to help the lucky few who were fast enough, leaving the rest of the country in an increasingly desperate and dangerous state of mind. Kay glanced out the plate-glass window at the three soldiers chatting on the sidewalk.

"I knew someone was following me," Leslie said, shaking her head. "When you see the same car behind you day after day you start to wonder if you're becoming paranoid."

"What do they want with you?" Kay asked.

"I've been working on a story for the *Washington Tribune*. A sort of retrospective on the Kennedy administration. It was supposed to be a fluff piece, until I stumbled onto a group of wealthy international industrialists in the late 50s and early 60s who had banded together to put pressure on the government."

"Pressure over what?"

"Space," she said, a note of surprise in her voice. "If you can believe it. Apparently in 1963 NASA scientists detected a burst of cosmic radiation being emitted from a planet ten light years from Earth. Of course, they were confused, since cosmic rays are normally blasted into space from supernovas and pulsars, not from ordinary planets. When they analyzed the signal, they found that it was filled with reams of binary data, but at the time they couldn't make heads nor tails of it. Regardless, they were confident they'd found proof of life beyond Earth. Those working on the project were sworn to secrecy

and it was given a top-secret compartmentalized classification. Not even Kennedy was briefed or supposed to be told anything about it. But somehow he found out. The space race was already in full swing. And now not only was Kennedy about to make an announcement that they'd found proof of extraterrestrial life, but he was going to fund a special program tasked with trying to make contact."

Kay was stunned. "I've never heard any of this, so obviously they talked him out of it."

Leslie gave her a look. "Yeah, they convinced him in Dallas with a bullet to the back of the head."

"No," Kay said, drawing out the word.

Leslie nodded. "Only a handful of folks are left in this town old enough to remember and even fewer willing to talk about it."

"And Lee Harvey Oswald?"

"That part of the assassination conspiracy was true. Oswald was a Cuban sympathizer who was used to carry out the killing."

"So who was behind it then?"

Leslie tilted her head slightly. "Back in those days they were called the Majestic 12. Today, they're known as Sentinel and they want nothing more than for Earth to keep to itself and stay out of the crosshairs of some roving galactic bully."

"Well, it looks like they've done a pretty crappy job of it," Kay said.

"Some things are clearly beyond their control. How could they have known that millions of years ago some alien ship had buried itself under the Gulf of Mexico? Or that for reasons no one really knows, another would be on its way?"

"What about your story in the *Tribune*?" Kay asked.

"They had it buried," Leslie said. "Tied the paper up in litigation, threw everything they could at us. Nearly bankrupted the paper. Thankfully you didn't have that problem."

"Huh? Oh, yeah."

"I hear you're up for a Pulitzer," Leslie said. "Although who can say whether anyone will still be around to hand it to you."

Kay tried to smile but the muscles in her face wouldn't cooperate. "You think Sentinel also tried to assassinate President Taylor?"

"I wouldn't put it past them. Although convincing the top members of President Taylor's cabinet to join the conspiracy was a stroke of genius, if you ask me. All I know is if it wasn't for you, they would

have gotten away with it.” Leslie sipped at her coffee. “I hear Myers is pressuring the Justice Department to try them as war criminals and has already recommended the death penalty. I also heard he’s had dozens of others arrested too. It’s like the French Revolution all over again.”

She was talking about the Terror, a ten-month period from 1793 to 1794 when a zealous revolutionary government used public executions as a way of spreading fear and obedience throughout the population.

There was certainly no shortage of fear. It was one of the reasons the streets were so empty. People were staying put, only going out when they had no other choice. The coffee shop was no exception. Normally at this time of day, the place would be packed with long lines stretching out the door. The smattering of people here now only made the contrast that much starker. And those who were here looked stressed out.

Going to a minimum-wage job was the last thing on the minds of people who believed the end was near. They were getting their coffee fixes by buying in bulk and staying home. A growing chorus of voices online, however, was calling the whole thing a giant hoax. That the planet wasn’t about to get pummeled, that the story had been concocted by the government as part of a giant power grab. The rallies they held, initially attended by a few dozen strange-looking characters in black jeans and sweatshirts, were now numbering in the hundreds and thousands. The group’s biggest publicity stunt to date had been breaking into the Senate Intelligence Committee hearing and releasing canisters of tear gas on the scientists who had come to brief Congress. Kay’s eyes dropped to the file folder and the picture of Mia Ward and Jack Greer. She wondered where they were and what they were doing that Sentinel wanted them out of the way.

“What about you?” Kay asked instead. “Aren’t you worried they might hurt you?”

Leslie leaned in. “My father-in-law has a cabin in North Carolina. The plan is to pack up the family and leave tonight.” She plucked her purse off the seat next to her and opened it so Kay could see. Inside was a silver revolver with a black grip. “You have one, right?”

Kay shook her head. She scanned for the soldiers again but they were gone. “I was gonna get one after I was attacked, but my father talked me out of it.”

Leslie reached down and removed a small .25 caliber pistol she kept strapped to her ankle. She folded it in a napkin and slid it over to Kay. “Consider this a parting gift. Just in case we don’t see one

another again.” Tears were already gathering along her eyelids. “Stay safe,” she mouthed. Leslie got up and walked out, leaving Kay with more to process than she had ever thought possible.

She had not gotten far when she saw a series of messages from her fiancé Derek.

Where have you been?

I've been trying to reach you.

She texted back: “Chasing a lead. I’ll come by your place tonight and tell you all about it.”

Your dad called. It was about your mother. Has he reached out?

Kay’s brow crinkled with concern. “I missed the call. What about her? She all right?”

Call him. Then call me right after.

The house phone rang twice before Kay’s dad answered. Judging by the noise in the background, the choir was in full swing and louder than ever. “Derek said you were trying to get hold of me,” she said, shouting over the racket. A woman two seats over threw Kay a dirty look. “Is Mom okay?”

“Yes, Kayza, your mother is fine. In fact, she is more than fine. Last night she sat up straight as a board and began talking. I tell you, it’s nothing short of a miracle!”

“Oh, Dad, that’s terrific,” Kay said, ecstatic. “I’ll bet Mom hasn’t wasted any time belting out her favorites with the choir.” Her mother had been one of the choir’s founding members when Felix had opened his ministry. It was part of the reason he had invited them to keep vigil by her bedside. If anything could pull her from the darkness, he had hoped it was the sound of her beloved choir.

“Well, no, she’s not exactly singing.” There was something in her father’s voice, the slightest hint of hesitation, concern.

“What do you mean? What’s she doing?”

“Kay, I’m not sure. From the moment she woke up she’s been scribbling. She’s gone through nearly all the paper in the house.”

She knew her father well enough to know that trace of worry in his voice was over her mother’s soul. He might not want to come right out and admit it, but he was starting to think some mischievous spirit had jumped under her skin while she had been lying there, sick and vulnerable. It certainly explained the extra oomph coming from the choir.

“Dad, take a good look,” Kay practically ordered him. “What do

you see?"

There was a pause as he did what she asked. "Page after page, it all looks the same."

"Are they drawings?" she asked, exasperated. "Is Mom drawing pictures?"

"No, not drawings, Kayza," her father replied, fear rising in his voice. "All I see are zeros and ones."

Chapter 41

Greenland

Jack came to pinned against the back wall of a house, his legs, arms and upper torso covered in ice and snow. He struggled to move. More importantly, he struggled to recall what had happened. The last thing he remembered was calling out a warning and seeing a blizzard exploding before his eyes. He realized now that blizzard had been a jagged chunk of ice crashing next to them.

Tamura was the first to appear. She staggered into the house and proceeded to start digging Jack out. Moments later Dag joined in. Once Jack's arms had been freed, he was able to help them with the rest. They lifted him to his feet. Jack searched himself for injuries.

"Everyone accounted for?" he asked.

Dag shook his head.

Jack hurried from the building and into what looked like a war zone. A mound of ice boulders nearby had a metallic hand sticking out the top. He ran over as fast as his legs could carry him and began digging Anna out. When he reached her head, he wiped the snow from her digital face.

"Anna, you with me?"

The screen was black.

"Anna!"

Slowly, faint features began to emerge. But where her eyes once sat there were now two X's. Below that, her tongue flopped out between slightly parted lips.

Jack frowned until he understood she was pulling his leg.

The screen flickered and her regular features returned.

"You nearly gave me a heart attack," he said, pulling her upright.

She bent forward, inspecting her legs.

Soon, all were accounted for except Gabby. From the street, it was clear a few of the surrounding buildings had been destroyed by falling ice. Could she have been inside one of these when they were hit? Everyone pitched in to help search, calling out to her over the radio as they dug.

"Uh, Jack," Grant said, motioning, his voice somber.

Jack was suddenly overcome with a pang of fear and anguish. "Please don't let Gabby be dead." He repeated the words over and

over, until they became a mantra. He crossed the street and arrived at the shell of a building where Grant was waiting. It looked as though a bomb had gone off inside. The walls were blown clear out and a gaping hole, nearly ten feet wide, remained where the floor had once stood.

The others circled around, staring down into the yawning black mouth at their feet. Jack got down on his hands and knees and switched on his helmet light.

“It looks like a fifteen- to twenty-foot drop,” he said, scanning back and forth until he centered the beam over what looked like the white boot from a biosuit.

“I see something,” he shouted, pointing. A mound of broken ice boulders lay beside her. Before anyone could talk him out of it, Jack dropped down, landing in what turned out to be pulverized ice crystals. In a matter of minutes, he dug Gabby out and sat her up against a wall that appeared to have been cut out of the bedrock.

“Is she okay?” Tamura asked.

The visor on Gabby’s helmet had a crack running down the front of it. Jack removed it and set it aside. He slid his left glove off and pressed the pads of his fingers against her carotid artery, feeling for a pulse.

“She’s alive,” he shouted. “She must have been standing in the doorway when the boulder knocked out the floor and pulled her down.”

Mullins leapt in, landing in the mound.

“That looked fun,” Dag said from above, sounding like a child anxious to play a new game.

Jack glanced up. “I’m not sure how we’re gonna get her out of here.”

“I heard about a situation like this in a riddle once,” Mullins said, searching around. “If we push everything we find into a pile, we might be able to make it to the top.” He disappeared from view for a moment and returned with an armful of dirt mixed with white sticks. He tossed them onto the snow pile and returned for more. “You gonna help or what?”

Jack crawled over to the items Mullins had just dropped and picked up one of the sticks. “Where did you find this?”

“They’re all over the place,” he said, breathing hard.

“These aren’t sticks,” Jack said, noticing their unusual shape. “They’re bones.”

Chapter 42

Washington, D.C.

"This is turning into one hell of a day," Kay said, blowing a curl of rebellious hair out of her face. "Please tell me you found something."

Lucas' embarrassed expression was not a promising sign. "Cracking the laptop's password was a snap. I used a plain old vanilla ripper program."

Kay crossed her arms. "Why do I sense a big, fat 'but' coming?"

Lucas' eyes traced down to Kay's waist. "If what I found is anything to go by, a big fat butt isn't your problem. This is." He swung the laptop around. On the screen was the frozen opening frame of a video. Lucas clicked the play button and proceeded to roll his eyes up and stick his tongue in the side of his cheek, mimicking someone minding their own business.

Right away, something about the video was making her uneasy. For starters, it had not been properly edited. Through shaky camera motions, she watched a woman entering a hotel room to meet a middle-aged, muscular man in a light suit. Within seconds, they were locked in an intimate embrace. They tore off each other's clothes with lust-filled abandon and proceeded to engage in a whole range of perverse and demeaning sexual acts. As the man ripped away what remained of the woman's clothes, Kay saw her own face and gasped, her hand flying up instinctively to cover her mouth.

"It's you," Lucas said, with noticeable surprise. "Is this why you had me crack the laptop, to destroy a batch of poorly shot revenge porn?"

Kay's jaw was moving but only the tiniest squeak was coming out. She clicked back a few seconds and watched over and over the part where her face was revealed.

"This isn't me," she pleaded, bony fingers dancing along her scalp.

Lucas' eyes dropped to some imperceptible spot on the desk between them. "Listen, I'm not here to judge. What you do in your spare time..."

"I'm telling you," she cried out, her hands balled into fists. "That woman may look like me, but I've never done anything like this before."

"What about when you were kidnapped? Do you think it's possible..." He held back, trying to be delicate, but what he was

suggesting was not making any sense. “That you were drugged and made to perform in a sick pornographic film?”

Screams of pleasure and pain echoed up from the laptop. She showed him the pictures she’d found in that sick bastard’s manila folder. In each of them, she was unconscious. In a handful of others, her eyes had been kept open with strips of medical tape. He flipped through the still shots as she skipped forward in the video, a look of shock and nausea plastered on her normally serene features. Then, somewhere within the last two minutes, the scene seemed to end and the man controlling the camera departed the hotel room. The camera followed him, only to emerge within the warehouse on Kendal Street in Ivy City. The same one she had visited the other day.

“It’s a movie set,” she said, a wave of relief washing over her. “See, it isn’t me, it’s an actress.”

They both watched, but you could only see her from the back, dressed in a robe, before she disappeared through a metal door.

“I believe you,” Lucas said, “really I do. But I’m not sure anyone else will. For all intents and purposes it’s you. So what’s the point of all this? Someone trying to extort you?”

“No,” Kay said, nibbling on her lower lip. “Not extort. They’re trying to shut me up. I’m getting the distinct impression that nothing is as it seems and the closer I get to the truth, the more nervous these guys become.”

Chapter 43

Greenland

Before long, Jack discovered the underground tunnel had served more than one purpose. Like the catacombs beneath Rome and Paris, shelves had been cut into a hard metamorphic rock called gneiss to hold the city's dead. Unfortunately, most of what they found there had turned to dust ages ago. But at some point, hundreds, perhaps thousands of residents had descended into this creepy subterranean labyrinth in search of shelter from the world above. Had it been to escape the firestorm from the impact sixty-five million years ago? The walls still bore some of the strange, ghostly etchings they'd carved into the rock. One of the images resembled a flower, drawn by the unsteady hand of a child.

During World War II, the London Tube had served a similar purpose. But unlike in the Tube, it seemed nearly all of those gathered here had perished. The floor was a mix of rock and soil and heaps of fossilized bone.

"This tunnel system heads north for quite a ways," Mullins said, returning from a brief scouting expedition. "I wouldn't be surprised if at some point it leads straight to the pyramid."

"If not," Jack said, "we may still be able to pop up behind the Israeli soldiers and take them by surprise."

Mullins turned to Gabby, whose eyes were starting to open. "How're you feeling?"

"Right now I see two of you," she replied, her fingers feeling a gash on the side of her head. "Does that answer your question?"

Jack and Mullins began helping the others descend.

No sooner had he landed then Dag rushed over and began studying the bones. "I swear I've seen a femur just like this before. It must be twenty-four inches long. Six inches longer than the average male femur."

"It's not human, that's for sure," Grant said, setting down his cases and peering over Dag's shoulder.

"The alien colony theory is officially debunked," Dag said, winking at Jack. "My guess is these people or creatures or whatever you wanna call them looked a hell of a lot like the large statue we found in the temple." Dag drew up a picture he'd taken with his glasses and held up the femur to compare.

"Try projecting the image," Jack suggested. "Increase the ratio until it's the same size as the bone and then place it inside the hologram, see if it fits."

"I've seen them do that in crime shows," Tamura said. "You know, where they find a skull and then overlap a picture of the person and an image of the skull to see if the features line up."

"Yeah, they seem to."

"But here's the million-dollar question," Gabby said, rising off the ground with Jack's help. "What are the odds you can find enough DNA for Grant to sequence?"

"Slim, I'd wager," Rajesh admitted, eyeing the bone with disgust.

Dag shook his head. "That's what paleontologist Mary Schweitzer thought too until she cracked open a *T. rex* bone back in 2005 and found blood vessels and soft tissues still inside."

"Hold the boat," Grant shouted, returning from out of the darkness with a skull. It looked about ten to fifteen percent bigger than a human skull with a protruding mandible. The brow ridge was swept back over a large brain cavity. Its mouth featured two pairs of upper and lower canines, along with large incisors and several sets of flattened molars. "The teeth are an unusual mix of carnivore and omnivore. Which is strange because my first impression was that we were looking at the skull of a wolf."

"But Dr. Holland," Rajesh said, "what you're holding hardly looks like a wolf at all."

"Yeah," Mullins chimed in. "I'm no scientist, but I grew up on a farm and I've seen my fair share of dead dogs and coyotes and I can tell you with certainty this isn't either of those."

"Perhaps not now," Grant said, shifting the skull in the light. "What we're seeing here might be the product of millions of years of evolution."

"So you think a civilization of wolf people lived here," Eugene said, mockingly.

"I'm not saying anything," Grant objected. "I'm simply attempting to understand who or what this skull might have belonged to in life."

"May I see that, Dr. Holland?" Anna asked, her metallic arms outstretched.

"Be my guest."

She flipped it over in her hands. "For a creature to transition from wolf to this would take an enormous number of morphological changes," she told them.

“How many, would you say?” Jack asked her.

“Approximately one hundred and twenty-five thousand.”

“Over what period of time?”

Anna’s eyes flickered. “That is more difficult to say, given it is impossible to know the precise conditions in which the creature evolved.” Jack gave her a look. “My best guess is seventy-five to a hundred million years, give or take a few million.”

“Well, that pretty much narrows it down,” Dag said, clapping his hands together.

“There is one other program I may be able to apply,” Anna said. “If Dr. Holland’s assertion that this specimen was descended from the Canidae family tree—that is to say, dog-like mammals—is correct, then I may be able to extrapolate from existing data in order to put some flesh on the bone.”

A scanning laser shot out from a spot above Anna’s forehead, passing over each of the skull’s features. A moment later, she fed an image into their glasses.

The furry face staring back at them was stunning in its humanity. Large dark eyes, a swept-back forehead and a protruding nose and mouth.

“It sorta looks like a werewolf,” Dag said, impulsively.

“The brain cavity appears to be much larger than the wolves we know today,” Jack observed, marveling at what he was seeing.

“They appear to have had bigger brains than we do,” Grant said.

“Dr. Holland is correct,” Anna told them. “The average human brain cavity measures approximately eleven hundred to thirteen hundred cubic centimeters, while the skull I am holding is one thousand four hundred and twenty-five cubic centimeters.”

“So they weren’t just hairy,” Gabby said. “They were also smart.”

“Please keep in mind, Dr. Bishop,” Anna added quickly, “the visual I provided was only an estimate.”

Jack cleared his throat. “If the head on the statue in the temple hadn’t been broken, we wouldn’t need to guess. Take a few of those bones with you for testing,” Jack suggested, “but hurry up. We’re running out of time.”

Chapter 44

Washington, D.C.

Kay was on her way to her parents' place when the call from Ron Lewis came through. Kay put him on speaker and tossed the phone onto the passenger seat.

"There's been a major policy shift at the White House and I want you to cover it," he told her, his voice rough from years of foreign cigarettes and barking at young reporters.

"I'm kinda in the middle of something big right now, Ron."

"Bigger than President Myers scrapping the underground bunker plan and deciding to fire a dozen nuclear missiles at that incoming alien ship? We're in talks with his people to do a one-on-one sitdown. Tell me it's bigger than that. I have a dozen reporters foaming at the mouth to grab hold of this one."

"Wait a sec. Didn't he promise to uphold President Taylor's bunker plan?"

"That's why I want you on it," he shouted. "With that rabbit you pulled out of your ass, you're up for a Pulitzer. You pretty much rocketed the Secretary of Defense all the way to the presidency. At the very least he owes you a one-hour sit-down."

Kay felt herself being wrenched in a million different directions at once. "Listen, something's come to light about my source inside the White House. It's something I need to look into."

"So you're turning down an interview with the president?" Understandably, Ron sounded like a man having trouble giving away a bag of money.

Kay bit her lip hard enough to draw blood. "Give it to one of the foamers," she said at last, feeling all the air go out of her body at once.

"If you say so," Ron said, disappointment oozing off of his every word. "I'll assume whatever you got going on, it's big."

"Not big," she said, before hanging up. "It's huge."

Kay spent the next several seconds beating the steering wheel before Lucas called. Her already pounding heart sped up a little faster. "Tell me you destroyed that video and fried the hard drive," she said, turning on her indicator and sliding into the right-hand lane.

"Darling, that nasty video was nuked before you reached the elevator. That isn't why I'm calling. After we were done, I kept

snooping through this guy's computer and found a program you might find interesting."

"I'm listening."

Just then a text came through from her dad.

Cannot wait to see you! I made white bean chili, your favorite.

"It's a program called Face2face. It's one of those Hollywood special effects things. That must be how they inserted you in the video."

Kay gripped the wheel, feeling bile rise up into her throat.

"If this isn't revenge porn," Lucas said, "then someone really wants to blackmail you."

"No shit. And I'm not the only one. Did you find any social media activity on the laptop by any chance?"

"Nothing."

That struck Kay as strange. "Not even a Facebook account?"

"Uh-huh, nada."

Thinking, she tapped her right leg. That was when her phone pinged. A highlight dropped down from the top of the screen. All she saw was the moniker Laydeezman.

"Lucas, let me call you back." She hung up.

She veered off the highway the first chance she got and pulled into the parking lot of a Grubb's Pharmacy. She glanced down at the message.

There's something I would like to show you.

Kay hesitated, her fingers hovering over her phone's keypad.

"I have the video you made. It's been destroyed."

What video?

"Stop playing games."

You mean this video?

An attachment popped up.

Kay felt hot blood rush up her neck and into her cheeks.

I'm glad you pulled over. It isn't safe to text and drive.

Her face felt like a full-blown volcano. How was it possible he could see her? Jerking in the driver's seat, Kay spun to see who might be watching her. One other car was in the parking lot. A few others passed by on the street. Her eyes tilted upward and found the traffic camera. A moment later, her gaze settled on her phone and the

camera there as well. He could be watching her from any one of these, she thought, her stomach roiling. Or maybe all of them.

With shaking fingers she clicked the attachment. A video began. It was the same one from the laptop, except this version was properly edited and even more graphic. Thick salty tears built up behind her closed eyelids.

“What do you want from me? You sick bastard. I know about Hollerman and the little list of names you were compiling. And I know about your twisted organization and what you did to JFK.”

Reputations are so easily tarnished in this day and age, Laydeezman replied, seeming to ignore her taunts. *And here's the most fascinating part. Even with the world in such a deep state of panic and fear, people still have time to read the gossip columns. It would be so terribly awkward having to explain to Ron Lewis and the rest of the staff at the Post how a graphic sex tape with you on it is circulating all over the Internet.*

“Back off or else, is that what you’re saying?”

Such a quick study. I'm not surprised Trish Han saw you as a threat and tried to keep you beneath her all these years.

“If you want me quiet? I'll do it, but on two conditions.”

A beat passed. *I'm listening.*

“First, you destroy all copies of this disgusting tape for good. And second, you’ll agree to meet me face to face.”

My apologies. Somehow I gave you the impression I was an idiot.

“I’m not kidding,” Kay snapped back, her fingers flickering over the keyboard. “Meet with me, face to face. No more tricks. No cops. No traps. Just you and I. You do that and I’ll drop the investigation.” Her chest felt like it was about to explode.

The pause which followed felt to Kay like an eternity.

Then at last, two final messages.

38.9099°N 76.9917°W

Tomorrow night. 11 P.M. Come alone or I guarantee, you'll have more than some dirty little video to worry about.

Chapter 45

Greenland

The team beat a path through the ancient crypt. Here and there, they ran into sections where the walls or ceilings had collapsed, forcing them to stop and clear enough space to pass. And yet the closer they drew to the pyramid's base, the more bones they began to see. It was starting to look as though at some point near the end, a full-blown panic had set in, with thousands of bodies in tight quarters all pushing in the same direction. But to what?

It was Jack's turn to take point when he spotted another break in the tunnel ceiling up ahead. There was no telling yet whether they would be able to squeeze by, but the chunks of ice mixed in with the collapsed stonework made it clear what had happened.

"If there's a way to climb out," Mullins suggested, "then we should look around and make sure we're heading in the right direction."

Jack stopped. "Do you think that's such a good idea? What if someone sees you and they follow us down here? We're liable to die with our backs to a cave-in."

"Plus," Eugene added, "down here we're safe from ambushes and falling ice bombs."

Jack motioned to the collapse up ahead. "Safer, maybe, but definitely not safe."

"You may think you're in charge, Jack," Mullins fired back, his tongue spiked with venom. "But I should remind you, this is a military operation."

"If we listened to you, we'd still be up top, imprisoned by the Russians and little more than collateral damage in Stark's attempts to liberate the facility. Speaking of that"—Jack turned to Anna—"I know we're even further underground, but are you able to send a message topside?"

"I may," Anna said, doubtful. "What would you like to say?"

"Let Admiral Stark know we're still alive and heading toward the source of the blast wave. If the Russians are still in charge up there, it won't matter since there's a good chance they know we're down here anyway."

"I will do my best," she said. After a moment—"I was able to briefly connect with the facility's command center and can report it is currently running on emergency power only. Self-diagnostics reveal

hull breaches in all but one of the modules.”

“Maybe the fighting isn’t over,” Gabby speculated, gravity in her voice.

They continued past the cave-in when Jack threw his fist in the air. Everyone stopped.

“You see something?” Dag said, his voice a whisper.

Jack pointed to a man crawling through the hard-packed ice. He seemed to be trying to make his way back on top, although it was hard to tell if he’d fallen through before or after the frozen boulder had punched an eight-foot hole in the ground. One thing was certain, he was wearing the same white snow gear the rest of his Israeli friends had on.

Jack charged ahead, briefly checking the opening to ensure no one was there. When the soldier saw him, he reached for the pistol at his side, but not before Jack brought the butt of his rifle down across the side of his head, knocking him out.

•••

“Both of his legs are broken,” Grant said, staring at the sprig of bone pushing up against the inside of the soldier’s pant leg. The soldier came awake slowly, wincing from the pain in spite of the morphine Grant had given him.

“Where’s the rest of your team?” Jack asked, grabbing a handful of the man’s hair and pulling his head back. He was olive-skinned with a thin face, dark hair and a prominent nose.

Behind them, Tamura was pacing back and forth, like a hungry dog waiting for its next meal. “He’s too out of it to speak. I say we just pop him—”

“Stand down, Lieutenant,” Mullins yelled. “You weren’t the only one who lost someone when they attacked the facility. Getting info from our enemies is standard procedure. Popping caps isn’t.”

“You weren’t there,” she protested. “You didn’t see.”

Jack ignored Tamura’s unusual behavior and repeated his question.

“I do not need to tell you a thing,” the man spat.

Leaning in, Jack pressed down lightly on his shattered right leg. The soldier howled in pain before Jack slapped his hand over the man’s mouth.

“Hurts so much more when you can’t scream, doesn’t it? Now listen, you glib bag of shit, you killed a whole bunch of our friends. I have half a mind to leave you alone with Tamura so we can see just

how much pain you can take before dying. Answer my questions and I'll leave you these." Jack held up two morphine auto-injectors. "Why go out screaming when you could spend your final minutes in bliss?"

His chest heaving up and down, he reached for the injectors, but not before Jack pulled them away, handing them to Grant. "Didn't your mother teach you to never eat your dessert before dinner?"

The man's head fell back against the crypt's cold stone wall. "I entered the building in search of the other members of my team and fell through the hole."

"How many are there?" Mullins shouted.

"Eleven of us descended. Four of us are dead and I am not far behind."

"Four?" Jack asked. "I thought we only got two of you?"

The soldier sneered. "You did. Yair and Liam were crushed by falling ice."

Jack's and the soldier's eyes met. "What is your mission?"

He turned away, seeming to struggle with whether or not to answer.

"Are you working for Sentinel?"

"Who?"

"A bunch of assholes who hate aliens, that's who," Dag said, clearing up the confusion. "Are you one of them or not?"

"I have no idea what you are talking about. We came because the *magefah* has been devastating our people. We were sent to extract any technology that might help."

"*Magefah?*" Jack repeated.

"*Magefah* is the Hebrew word for plague," Anna told them.

The soldier regarded her with fear. "What is that thing?"

"Her name's Anna," Mullins said, defensively.

"What was your extraction plan?" Jack asked.

"Simple. Once the Russians gained control of Northern Star, we would exit the same way we entered."

Eugene threw his hands into the air. "Great, now they're working with the Russians. This keeps getting better."

"Was that before or after you blew the place up?" Dag asked.

"Before," the soldier admitted, wincing. "Once we were done, a Russian ICBM would take care of the rest."

“A nuke?” Gabby said, shocked.

“Gather intel, salvage tech and then neutralize the source of the genetic mutations. That was our mission.”

“And what about us?” Tamura said. “I guess it doesn’t matter who you kill, as long as you get what you want.”

The soldier shook his head. “When your government discovered the spaceship near Mexico, Israel was kept out of the loop, lied to until your news media had plastered it all over the world. The United States chose to ignore her friends and allies. What were we supposed to do, sit back and leave the fate of our people in your hands?”

“Where are the other members of your team?” Jack said, not believing the man’s earlier denials.

The soldier shook his head and Jack grabbed the man’s leg in a firm, excruciating grip.

That was when Tamura stopped pacing and planted her feet. “This is for my friends you killed, you son of a bitch,” she said, drawing her pistol and firing a single bullet into the soldier’s head.

Chapter 46

Rome

Mia had always heard about the infamously narrow streets of Rome. Seeing them in photos was one thing. Driving through them at high speed was another altogether. Every road they turned down, it seemed, was lined on either side with an alternating sequence of cars and mopeds—what the locals called *motorinos*. Rather than being laid out in a grid as cities were in North America, Rome had been built in a series of concentric rings. This was an outcome of the rather organic way the city had grown and expanded over the many centuries. It was further evidence that its ancient foundations had been laid down long before the advent of modern urban planning, a reality that continued to vex architects and engineers alike. If you were on foot, intending to see the sights, that little quirk was charming and even delightful. Driving in Dr. Putelli's Alfa Romeo, navigating streets with less than a clenched fist of space on either side, left something to be desired.

"What's the name of this place again?" Ollie asked, honking at three teenage boys standing in the street serenading a young girl. He rolled down his window. "Better up your game, gents. There isn't much time left." A hearty burst of laughter filled the car.

"102 Viale del Campo Boario," Mia told him. "I'm putting it into the GPS. The place is called Aventino Wellness Facility."

"Blah, sounds about as inviting as a lobotomy. Hardly any wonder that Putelli bloke chose to stay back."

Mia switched on the radio. She crossed the odd Italian music channel punctuated by long dead zones filled with static. At last she found a station in English. An announcer cheerfully informed them the Dow Jones had dropped fifteen thousand points in only the last week.

"There goes your 401k," Ollie joked, his eyes never leaving the impossibly narrow road. He knew if he put a single dent in this car, Putelli would very likely need his own bed at the asylum.

Mia flipped through the files the doctor had given them on the girls. "When Tom and Sven found me in Buenos Aires," she said, "they showed me pictures of you with your family. I must say, your wife was beautiful. So was your son."

Hands gripping the steering wheel, Ollie remained quiet.

"I understand you don't owe me anything, but it would have been nice to know all the same."

"I'm not sure where your friends got their information, but she

wasn't my wife," he told her, his voice betraying more than a hint of strain. "And I'm sorry to say the little one wasn't mine either."

"She was a girlfriend?"

"Aye."

"It's none of my business, anyway," Mia said, adjusting the knob on the radio.

"Maybe not. It just happens to be a story I'd hoped I would never have to tell anyone, let alone you."

The expression on Mia's face changed. "Did she betray you?"

"Oh, yeah, but probably not in the way you're thinking. You see, I got involved with a married woman. At least, she was technically still married. Amy and her bloke, Lance, were separated and living apart. He took the condo in downtown Sydney and she stayed at the house in the suburbs. I met Amy at the petrol station, of all places. She was at the pump, trying to get her credit card working. Turned out she was running a little tight because her prick of an ex was withholding alimony payments. Something about that pretty face of hers and a Sheila in need of help just tweaked me the wrong way."

"You're a sucker for an underdog," Mia said, fighting the sting of jealousy.

"You can say that again. How do you think I ended up here with you? Anyway, with Amy, one thing led to another and the two of us started dating. I became a surrogate husband and father overnight. For the first time in my life I felt like I had finally found my place in the world. Soon enough, I started hearing about the abuse. Amy would come back from a joint visitation with bruises on her wrists. It was nothing, she'd say. Lance just got angry when she brought up the money. This went on for a close to a month and the whole time I was doing all I could to bite my lip and fight the urge to head over there and beat the little puke to a pulp. She begged me not to. Made me swear no matter what I wouldn't hit him, that it would only complicate the custody hearing.

"When she showed up with a black eye, that was when I lost my shit. Old Lance didn't know I was a connected man. Maybe not mob connected, but Sentinel's reach runs far deeper than any organized crime ring. But you see, I'm not the type to send others to do my dirty work. So I did it myself. Mostly just to scare him. Showed up at his fancy oceanfront apartment and when he opened the door I clocked him one. Sent him straight on his arse.

"I was only gonna hit him a couple more times, leave him with a taste of what I'd do to him if he ever touched her again. Before I

could, he scrambled to his feet and ran into the kitchen. Came back with a twelve-inch butcher knife pointed down like he intended to jam it into the top of my skull. Anyway, that's when I shot him. Two in the chest and one in the head, just like I'd been taught." He tapped his chest and forehead with the tip of his index finger.

Mia's hand had crept up and over her mouth in shock. "Oh, no, Ollie. Please tell me you're making this up."

He glanced away and the look on his face said one thing and one thing only.

I don't make stuff up.

"Were you arrested?"

Ollie shook his head. "No, but it meant Sentinel could dig their claws even deeper into me. They had *kompromat*, as the Ruskies like to say. But that wasn't the worst of it. Sure enough the cops investigated and discovered on the days Amy said Lance had abused her, he'd been at work. The guy was an investment banker in meetings all day with about three dozen witnesses to prove it. Turned out she'd been shopping for a hitman for months before she finally settled on a washed-out sucker named Ollie Cooper."

Mia put a hand on his forearm. She remained quiet for a bit, digesting what he'd just told her. Then she said, "What you did was wrong, but I know your heart was in the right place."

"I tend to wear that heart of mine on the end of my sleeve instead of where it belongs. And every so often someone spots it hanging out there and plunges a dagger straight through it."

•••

The residue of Ollie's ghastly story was still clinging to Mia by the time they reached the Aventino facility. The building ran the length of the street and resembled the kind of stark, unimaginative architecture more at home in Soviet-era Poland. Once inside, the interior did little to dispel Mia's initial impression. The floors were polished granite sprinkled with black and gold specks. A mint-green receptionist's desk loomed before them. Behind it sat a man with a pencil-thin mustache.

"We're here on behalf of Dr. Putelli from Saint Andrea Hospital," Mia said.

"ID's or passports, please," the man said in broken English.

They handed them over and the man checked them before handing them back. His eyes fell to a scrap of paper with some scribbled notes before saying, "You are here to see Sofia and Noemi Oneto, is that correct?"

“We are.”

“No problem. Please sign here, here and here.”

Ollie sighed. “Would you like my blood type and astrological sign while we’re at it?”

The man glanced up, humorless. “I beg your pardon?”

“Ignore my friend,” Mia said, digging her elbow into Ollie’s ribs.
“He’s just cranky because of the traffic.”

The man offered a lame smile before leading them to the elevators.

“Exit at the fifth floor, turn right and keep going until you reach the head nurse’s station. Dr. Felli will meet you there.”

They did as they were told, Mia suddenly feeling that maybe this hadn’t been such a great idea after all. When the elevator doors opened onto the fifth floor, they entered a darkened corridor, quiet except for the periodic shriek of a distant voice crying out in Italian.

They came to the nurse’s desk and the beautiful brunette leaning against it. *“Buongiorno, I’m Dr. Felli,”* she said, struggling but perfectly able to make herself understood in English. “I’m the head psychiatrist here at Aventino. I understand you’ve come to see Sofia and Noemi.”

“That’s right,” Mia said. She took a moment to explain what they were looking for.

“You understand, their evaluations have begun, but are not yet complete.”

“I do. Is there anything you can tell us about their condition?” Mia asked.

“What my colleague means to ask is: in your professional opinion, have both those girls gone nuts or what?”

Dr. Felli’s sculpted eyebrows rose in surprise.

“Dr. Putelli told us the girls had suffered from a psychotic break with reality,” Mia explained. “And we’re trying to understand what might have caused it.”

“I see,” Felli said, relieved. “Both girls appear to be suffering from schizophrenia. So far, I believe the most pronounced symptom is that they claim to be hearing voices.”

“Voices,” Mia repeated. “Have they mentioned what the voices are saying?”

“I’m afraid not. Again, their evaluation has only just begun.”

“Can we see them?”

Dr. Felli seemed to consider this for a long moment. “Yes, but only

if we make it brief. And please limit your questions as they speak very little English.”

She led them down a long corridor. On the right were several doors with glass portholes.

Dr. Felli stopped and motioned through one of the windows to a young girl sitting before a table. “This is Sofia,” she said. The girl had pale skin and delicate features only partly obscured by her long black hair. Sitting next to her was a graduate student attempting to engage her.

They entered and the girl looked up, only mildly interested.

“Hello, my name is Mia,” Mia said, thinking at once of Zoey and fighting hard to leave those overpowering emotions back where they belonged. Sofia’s tiny hand went around and around in giant, meaningless circles. “Do you like drawing?”

“We encourage them to draw in order to express how they’re feeling.”

Ollie’s gaze shifted back to the giant loops Sofia was doodling. “Looks to me like the young lass thinks she’s getting the runaround.”

Mia faked a laugh. “I’m afraid Dr. Cooper has been moonlighting as a comedian.”

Ollie grinned and shrugged as if to say, *You got me*.

“Does she speak?” Mia asked, taking a knee beside Sofia.

“They’ve hardly said a word since arriving,” Dr. Felli admitted. “We’ve done everything we can to make them comfortable.”

“What are you drawing?” Mia asked, running her hand down the girl’s long jet-black hair. She couldn’t help thinking about her Zoey and the feeling left a burning ember in the middle of her belly. Sofia stopped and smiled up at her before returning to her circles.

“Maybe we should give Sofia some space,” Dr. Felli suggested, ushering them out of the room and closing the door. She led them four doors down and paused before opening it. “I think you’ll find Noemi isn’t nearly as shy.”

They entered to find the second twin also sitting at a table drawing, a minder next to her. Noemi had pale skin and fine features, much like her sister, but her black hair was short and scraggly.

Once again, Mia knelt down to introduce herself, but this time she froze when she saw what was on the scrap paper before her. In a child’s hand it read:

hello my name is mia

She stood back up, a chill racing up her arms. Now Ollie and Dr. Felli noticed it too, both of them looking on in puzzled astonishment.

“Could she have heard us?” Mia asked.

Dr. Felli shook her head and then nodded. “I don’t know.”

Ollie searched around for a vent connecting the cells.

“Noemi,” Mia asked, “did you hear us speaking with your sister just now?”

The young girl shook her head. “I saw the words and wrote them.”

The four adults exchanged glances.

“Were you able to hear us when we were in with Sofia?” Mia asked the psych student sitting next to her.

“Not that I noticed, but I was busy asking Noemi questions of my own.”

Mia turned to Dr. Felli. “Would you mind if Ollie went into Sofia’s room, just to see if we can hear him from there?”

Dr. Felli’s gaze kept dropping to the scrap paper. “Uh, yes, of course. I’ll bring him over myself.”

They closed the door behind them while Mia, Noemi and the grad student stayed behind. Mia strained to listen for any signs of Ollie’s voice. A few moments passed before she asked the student if she’d heard anything. Looking worried now, the young woman shook her head.

Ollie and Dr. Felli returned when Mia saw Noemi had taken a new piece of scrap paper and begun scribbling in earnest.

hello hallo can you hear me hello mia can you hear us

“Tell me that wasn’t what you were just shouting from the other room,” Mia begged Ollie. But his sickly pale complexion told her everything she needed to know.

“Are you certain you couldn’t hear us?” Ollie asked, mystified.

Mia shook her head. Her eyes fell once again to the paper on the desk. Noemi stared up at her, the child’s eyes like two deep dark pools.

“What the hell is going on?”

Chapter 47

Greenland

The gunshot erupted less than a foot from Jack's head. His ears rang as the smell of gunpowder wafted through the crypt. The soldier's head was bent back at a strange angle, his eyes open and staring. A small red bullet hole bloomed between his eyes.

"Are you insane?" Mullins yelled. "I specifically told you to stand down. The guy was singing like a caged bird."

"We got more than we needed," Tamura replied, holstering her pistol.

"Is this about satisfying some personal thirst for revenge?" Jack said, accusingly.

"I won't rest until every last one of them is dead," she told him without a hint of emotion.

Jack found Grant's eyes. The botanist nodded, set down his science kits and grabbed Tamura in a bear hug from behind. Jack then relieved her of her weapon and handed it to Mullins. "There's no place here for a loose cannon. You've been biding your time waiting for an opportunity to waste the folks who killed your friends. I get that. But right now that's putting us and this mission in jeopardy."

She scowled at him, her lips drawn thin with tension. "I'm sorry. You're right, I acted impulsively. It won't happen again."

"Let her go," he told Grant, who did so and stepped back.

Without saying a word, Mullins pushed past them until he was swallowed by the blackened tunnel ahead.

After gathering their gear, they trudged along for thirty more minutes before they came to a massive circular stone slab. This might have signaled the end of their underground travels had it not been for the ten-foot hole blasted into the slab's bottom-right section. Jack recalled feeling the ground shake during the battle on the surface. He wondered if this had also been when the blast had occurred.

A carpet of fossilized bones littered the entire area, protruding from the frozen ground like long skeletal fingers.

"There's so many of them," Rajesh said, reciting what sounded like a silent prayer.

"The city's survivors flocked here," Jack said, scanning the floor and feeling sick at the sight. "They came here, hoping to be let inside to safety."

He imagined the terrified masses, their fists pounding against the giant stone door as it closed on them. Broken bones jutted out from the groove where the heavy slab had rolled into place.

"They were crushed trying to get inside," Gabby said, seeing the same thing. "It was the end and many of them knew it."

Anna navigated through the ossuary, bones crunching beneath every one of her heavy steps. Lasers fired from her forehead, measured and cataloged everything they saw here. "I sense an increase in g-forces," she noted, "although my instruments are not detecting any anomalies."

The concern in her voice drew Jack's attention at once until he realized what might be causing the false alarm. "When did the reading start?" he asked her.

"Moments ago," she replied. "My weight has remained constant, I am certain. And yet I have the sensation of a force pushing down on me."

"That's sadness," Jack told her.

Rajesh concurred. "Anna's emotional program is always running in the background, accentuating and solidifying her preexisting reference points."

"You mean her tastes?" Dag added.

"Exactly. Rather than simply smiling when someone she likes enters the room, she now has a corresponding bio-mechanical reaction."

"If she's feeling sadness," Gabby observed, moving closer, "then that means, at some level, she's also capable of feeling empathy."

"Perhaps the most elusive of all the human emotions," Grant said.

"Really?" Tamura said, kneeling down next to Mullins as they studied the hole blown through the stone slab. "More elusive than love?"

Grant considered this. "Most of us have felt love at one time in our lives, even if only from a family member. But empathy, the act of putting yourself in someone else's skin and attempting to truly understand what they might be going through, that's become something of a lost art."

"Isn't this a dangerous path Anna is heading down?" Eugene said, directing the question to Rajesh. "Eventually computers will be running our entire lives. What if one day, Anna or something just like her feels terrible about the hunger and suffering in the world and decides that curing the planet's ills begins and ends with humanity's

extermination? Haven't they run simulations, asking computer programs to fix hunger in the most efficient way, and the damn thing suggested offing three-quarters of the population? You're all so worried about Tamura getting hot under the collar, you've failed to consider what might happen if Anna loses it."

"She cannot," Rajesh said calmly. "I have added a series of fail-safes. Should her digital synapses flood her system with purely emotional impulses, she'll go into a safe mode and be unable to act or make decisions until she's manually rebooted."

Anna stopped scanning the gruesome display around them and then smiled at Eugene. "I hope that makes you feel less frightened, Dr. Jarecki."

Eugene's brow stitched together. "Are you kidding? Frightened is my baseline. The only time I won't be frightened is when I'm dead. Until then, every moment is little more than an awkward date with my own neuroses."

"What's your take on the blast?" Jack said, eager to change the subject.

"It's fresh all right," Mullins confirmed. The faint smell of detonated C4 was still present, which meant the Israeli team had recently come through here.

"The guy we found said he didn't know where his friends had gone," Gabby said.

Dag snorted. "He lied, of course. Did you expect him to tell the truth?"

She shook her head. "Not really, but now there's no way of knowing what else he might have kept from us."

"Maybe Tamura had the right idea shooting him," Eugene said.

Mullins rose, rifle in hand. "The only thing we can be sure of is that anyone on the other side of this door means to kill you. We've already lost three members of our team, I don't intend to lose any more." And with that, he leveled his weapon and stepped through the hole.

Chapter 48

Washington, D.C.

Kay drew her mother into a tight hug, one that she never wanted to end. She'd been with her parents all day, had arrived the night before and decided she would soak up as much time as she could before going to her meeting with Laydeezman. Had even dropped off Goggles, who was adapting to his new environment as fast as any cat could be expected to. Inside, the thought of what might happen in that warehouse, late at night in an already sketchy part of town, left her guts churning.

"Are you trying to suffocate me?" her mother Therese said with a hearty laugh and the beaming smile Kay had come to know and love.

Reluctantly, Kay let her go. "I was worried you'd never wake up again."

"We were all worried," her father said, coming into the living room struggling with three glasses of red wine. He was notoriously clumsy and this maneuver had bad news written all over it. Kay swooped in to help.

"None for me," she said, checking her phone and seeing it was nearly nine. "I've got to leave soon." Factoring in the checkpoints she would surely encounter along the way, the drive from here to Ivy City would take at least an hour.

"Leaving?" her father said, horrified. "At this time of night? I thought you were here with us for good?"

"I want to be," she said, telling the truth. "There's just one last thing I have to do."

A knock at the door startled her. Felix caught the reaction and scowled. "Look at you, jumping like a scared kitten. You're in no shape to go anywhere, young lady."

Therese opened the door right as Kay's hand slipped into her purse, her fingers finding the cool, reassuring metal of the pistol Leslie had given her.

She nearly gasped when she saw that it was Derek.

Her father set his wine down and gave him a hearty embrace. Therese followed. The whole time Derek's eyes were squarely on Kay's.

"If I'd known you were coming I'd have prepared something to eat," Therese said, embarrassed.

“Wine?” Felix said, offering his own.

Forcing a grin, Derek waved his hand. “Thanks, I can’t stay long. I came to see how you were feeling.”

Therese put her hands together as if in prayer. “I’ve never felt better in my whole life. I used to get winded going up the stairs. Now I can take them two at a time. My mind feels sharper, like a dense fog has been lifted. Felix says he sees God’s hand in all of this and I can assure you he’s right.”

“That’s so great,” Derek said, only the tiniest hint of concern showing on his handsome features. “I also came by to have a word with Kay. Lately, she’s been so hard to get a hold of.”

“You don’t say,” her father quipped.

Kay felt the sands of time slipping through her fingers. “That sounds great, honey,” she said. “How about when I get back?”

“Back? From where?”

“I’m meeting someone for work.” She wanted to keep her plan as vague as humanly possible.

“At ten o’clock at night?”

She knew Derek well enough by now. He wasn’t the jealous type. If anything he was worried about her safety. And he had good reason to be. But if she told him more she might risk making an already terrible situation so much worse.

“Wait here and catch up with my parents and we’ll talk when I get back.” She moved in, kissed him and then broke for the door. He followed her out and down the driveway, her parents pretending not to watch, but watching all the same.

“What the hell is going on? You’ve been acting really weird these last few days.”

When she kept going, Derek grabbed for her arm to slow her down. Instead he caught the strap of her purse, sending it careening to the pavement, its contents spilling out.

They both stood and stared at the gun before Kay kneeled down and crammed everything back into her purse.

“Since when do you have a gun?”

“If you try to stop me you’re only going to make things worse. I need you to trust me. Do you?”

His mouth had fallen open. “Huh?”

“Do you trust me?”

“Uh, yeah, of course I trust you.”

“Then let me do this. I’ll keep my phone on if you need me.”

She kissed him hard, pressing her lips against his and relishing every second of his touch. A moment later, she pulled away, knowing she would either find the missing pieces to this strange and disturbing puzzle or end up dead.

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The street lights on Kendal were out when she arrived, casting the already dim neighborhood into near-total darkness. A half-moon bathed the area in a ghostly hue of ash dust and dark satin. Kay checked her phone and saw that it was 10:55 P.M. She got out and circled around to the back of the warehouse. With the pistol gripped tightly she crossed uneven ground, past discarded metal drums and piles of wood pallets.

The door was slightly ajar. She let herself in. Her heart was hammering wildly against the inside of her chest. On the wall, a single emergency light guided her along the corridor. She reached the final door before the warehouse’s open space and slid the gun back into her purse. She pulled open the door and squinted against the bright light shining from the other end of the warehouse. Her arm rose instinctively, shielding her eyes from the glare. In the center of the open space was a single wooden chair. In the office above, a lone, dark figure stood silhouetted against the paneled glass. It disappeared only to reemerge on the metal stairwell. The figure’s hard-soled shoes clicked along every riser. This was followed by a muffled version once they reached the concrete floor below.

“I was not sure you would come,” the man’s voice said. It was deep, reverberating all around her. “Now, put your phone into your purse and slide it behind you, as far as it’ll go.”

“My phone?” Kay’s nerves were so shot she wasn’t sure she had heard him properly.

“You have three seconds.”

Even as an adult, somehow the counting trick still got people moving. Kay removed her phone, placed it in her purse and slid it a few feet away.

“Now take a seat.”

She did so. “What about you?”

“I prefer to stand,” he replied. His back was to the light, which meant all she could see was little more than an amorphous shape. “Time is ticking, Ms. Mahoro. You wanted to meet. Best get on with it.”

She squinted against the light. “There are hundreds if not thousands of other reporters in this town you could have reached out to. Why me?”

Even in the darkness, Kay could hear a smile form on his lips. “We’ve been following your career with interest for quite some time. You might say we’ve been helping you along the way.”

“Helping me? Bullshit.”

“Is it, Kay? That generous scholarship you won to Yale. Did you really think your upper-middle SAT scores and the work you did with your father’s ministry put you ahead of so many other worthy applicants? Did you think Trish Han was thrilled adding a green reporter with no experience to the roster? She didn’t want you, Kay. But we have friends in high places.”

“Who, Ron Lewis?”

The man laughed. “That’s always been your problem, Kay. You’ve never allowed your imagination to soar.”

“So you used me?”

“Yes, but you’ve already figured that out. The difference was, you thought you were the one using me. But I’m sure a smart girl like you has already managed to fit the pieces together, haven’t you?”

Kay felt the stinging pain in her sides, the one that comes with every realization we try desperately to ignore. “The VP and the other cabinet members. They’re innocent, aren’t they?”

“Perfectly. And you helped to get them arrested. You see, the rules of presidential succession are so specific. When it became clear President Taylor was not going to fulfill his promises of destroying the threat to Earth, he had to be removed. But our dilemma was clear. How could we get our man sitting in the Oval Office when four others stood in his way?”

“Frame them for attempted assassination.”

“Attempted was not part of the plan. Taylor was meant to die in that flaming chopper crash. That he’s still alive is little more than an inconvenience. Of course, once the video got out implicating them, there was no way Millard or any of the others could be sworn in to replace him. Not until an investigation took place. One that would take more time than we had. That left our man Myers.”

“And when they finally discover the video’s a fake?”

The shadow man stepped forward, a thin strip of light illuminating his forehead. “By then it won’t matter. The conspirators will face a show trial and then execution. Then missiles will launch from dozens

of silos across the country and with any luck, it'll buy us a little more time until the Ateans send another one. You see, Dr. Greer should never have tinkered with that ship. Can't anyone else see we were so much better off before any of this happened?"

"And what if you're wrong?"

"About what?"

"About everything," Kay said, the fear in her voice turning into anger, rage. "What if the missiles aren't enough and thousands die who might have lived if they'd only been allowed to go underground?"

"Wouldn't you prefer to die fighting out in the open rather than hiding underground in the dark?"

"I want to die with my head held high," she protested. "Not betraying everything I stand for."

"And what good are principles if you're dead?"

"You used me, the way your people used Lee Harvey Oswald and probably many others." She felt the tears gathering and forced them back.

"So many more than you could ever know. Ask yourself this. When we have saved the planet, will anyone worry about the ugly way in which we did it? They'll only thank God we acted when we did."

"Then what do Dr. Greer and Dr. Ward have to do with this? Are you trying to punish them for starting this whole mess?"

"Punish is a relative term. They're under the illusion they can end this catastrophe another way, a peaceful way. They don't yet realize you can't reason with an alien race that only wants to destroy. We know for a fact they've done it before. And we have proof they are attempting to do it again. You see, I have a theory of my own. They're jealous of us."

Kay was confused. "Jealous? Of what?"

"They wanted to create life on Earth to prove the potency of their own power, while ensuring none of their creations would ever be able to challenge them. They're the worst kind of jealous, paranoid god who see threats lurking behind every corner."

"After all that, you think a fake sex tape is gonna stop me from talking?"

"No. But another tape might. This one features your father and one of his young, impressionable parishioners."

Kay's eyes grew wide. "No one will believe it."

“Our work was good enough to fool you as well as the intrepid FBI. Then again, it’s easy to convince someone when they already think it’s true. You’ve played your role. Just remember, when Oswald found out the truth, he threatened to talk as well and look what happened to him. You may not like me very much—in fact, you probably hate me with every fiber of your being—but I just might be humanity’s last hope.”

Kay leapt out of her chair and ran for the gun in her purse. If she could get there quick enough, she could blow this bastard away and bring down the entire house of cards his lies and manipulations were built on. Sliding on the slippery concrete floor, she found the bag and struggled to pull back the zipper. Her hand dove inside and emerged with the gleaming silver pistol. Then a fist closed around her wrist.

“What are you doing?”

She struggled to free her hand. Here he was so close she could feel his hot breath against her. If she could only angle the gun a few degrees, she might be able to hit him.

“Don’t do this, honey. I love you.”

Her eyes rose from the barrel and focused on the face before her. It was Derek. She spun, her heart sinking as she realized the shadow man was gone.

“I followed you using the GPS feature on your phone,” Derek said. “I just couldn’t let you come out here alone.”

She fell into his arms and wept.

He asked her over and over what had happened and every time Kay’s tortured reply was the same.

“It’s all my fault.”

Chapter 49

Greenland

After passing through the stone door, the ground at their feet began to dip at a twenty-degree angle. They were heading further underground, ice and gravel crunching beneath their boots. The further down they went, the wider the corridor became. Tool markings chiseled into the walls gave evidence of the grueling manual labor involved in carving out this underground sanctuary.

Mullins checked the crude map he'd drawn. "My guess is in another hundred yards we should be beneath the pyramid."

"And then?" Gabby said, seeking an answer to the obvious.

"We look for a passage that leads directly inside."

"Watch your footing," Jack told them. "One slip and you might end up all the way at the bottom."

"Bottom of what?" Dag asked without getting a response.

Soon the floor leveled out and brought them to a spot where the tunnel branched off in two separate directions. The team kept to the right, entering a slightly narrower, roughly hewn corridor with twelve-foot ceilings and chambers on either side. Searching them one by one, they found little of interest.

"Dr. Holland," Anna called out after disappearing into one of the small rooms. "There is something here."

Jack followed Grant inside, curious. "What have you got?"

"The wall," she said, pointing. Even with their LED lights set on full, Jack couldn't see anything except a smooth stone surface.

"The ceiling is arched and a lot smoother than the entrance tunnel," he said. "Is that what you wanted to show me?"

She switched on an X-ray fluorescence imaging beam and suddenly a drawing began to appear. Although rough and incomplete, it looked like a nature scene. At one end of the room was a depiction of daytime, complete with palm trees and a blazing sun. On the other was a nighttime sky, thick with stars and a brilliant full moon.

"There's no face," Jack remarked.

Standing next to him, Grant was also puzzled. "That's right."

"Whoever did this had likely been cooped up underground for months or even years. They were trying to surround themselves with memories of the world outside. I just find it interesting the moon has

no face.”

Gabby was standing at the doorway. “That’s probably because those particular impact craters on the moon hadn’t happened yet.”

The idea was still hard to wrap your head around.

Grant examined a crumbling stone table and bench protruding from the wall. “Look how low the seat is compared to the edge of the table.”

“It suggests these people had short legs and a very long torso,” Jack told him.

“Which fits perfectly with the proportions of the statue we found in the temple.”

Things were certainly adding up.

It seemed silly to draw such sweeping conclusions. And yet, if some future civilization stumbled upon the weathered and crumbling remains of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, they could glean a wealth of information on human anatomy. While the size might provide a false impression of how big humans were, it certainly would give them an idea of our proportions, that we clothed ourselves and were relatively hairless, except for a small section at the top of our skulls.

Grant set the briefcases on the desk and opened the sequencer. “I don’t recall seeing many tables around,” he noticed. “This may be the only chance I get to do this in relative comfort.” He began to sit, only to find he could barely see over the table.

“Mullins,” Jack called over the radio. “You read me?”

“Yeah, where are you?”

“We got held up with something. You and the others keep searching ahead. We’ll catch up soon.”

“Roger that.”

Grant then proceeded to crack one of the femurs against the table’s edge. It made a painful crunching sound. Dust flew into the air. He peered inside the opening.

“Anything?” Jack asked.

Grant shook his head and tossed the bone aside. He took another and did the same. This one was far more promising. Using a pair of tweezers, he scooped some of the marrow into the receptacle and closed the tiny lid. “If there’s any DNA in this thing, we should know shortly.”

“Anyone see where Anna went?” Gabby asked, looking around.

“She can’t be far,” Jack said, heading out to find her. “Anna, are you nearby?”

“In here, Dr. Greer,” she said. “Second room on the right.”

He found her scanning the walls here as well. Jack removed his helmet, thick plumes of warm breath escaping him. This time Anna hadn’t found drawings, but what looked like words scribbled over every visible surface.

“Any clue what it says?” he asked, long shot though it was.

“I cannot decipher the meaning, if that is what you are asking. However, it is consistent with other samples I have collected. There are other conclusions that can be drawn. For example, the erratic nature of the text and tremble in the author’s hand indicate either a nutritional deficiency or deterioration of the subject’s mental health.”

“He was bonkers,” Jack said. “Bananas. Looney Tunes. I have others if you like.”

Anna smiled. “I never indicated the subject was male and yet you assumed that he was. Why is that?”

Jack scratched his chin. “Uh, I don’t know. I suppose that’s just part of being human.”

“By human, do you mean leaping to conclusions without sufficient data?”

“In a perfect world, those leaps are designed to save us time. If, say, ninety percent of homicides are caused by males, it becomes easy to hear the word ‘killer’ and automatically assume the assailant is a guy.”

“Men might be responsible for more violent acts, but not all men are violent.”

“Exactly,” Jack said. “That’s where the leap happens. Facts are one thing, but drawing conclusions from unconscious bias is something each and every one of us struggles with.”

“Jack,” Grant cut in.

“Is the sequence done?”

“It is and I suspect the results will surprise you.”

Chapter 50

Greenland

“I’m not sure I’m following,” Jack said, his arms extended, palms up as though waiting for Grant to fill them with something.

“Based on their genome,” Grant explained, indicating the room they were in and everything around them, “the people who lived here were the ancestors of modern cetaceans—that is, dolphins and whales.”

The weight of Grant’s words hung in the air like a heavy mist.

“You see, we thought they were related to wolves, but I should have known better. They were really part of the *Mesonyx* family.”

“If you recall, Dr. Greer,” Anna said, entering behind him, “we discovered the *Mesonyx*’s genome catalogued in the Atean ship’s incubation lab, right along with the sample we found for the human ancestor, *Plesiadapiformes*. ”

“So before dolphins took to the sea,” Jack said, “you’re saying they once created a thriving civilization on earth?”

Gabby uncrossed her arms. “But that’s not possible. We have fossil evidence five to ten million years after the mass extinction sixty-five million years ago which clearly shows *Mesonyx* still in its small, wolf-like form. The creatures that slowly adapted to the oceans over millions of years certainly weren’t seven feet tall or for that matter bipedal. How do you explain that?”

“There’s only one way any of it makes sense,” Jack admitted. “*Mesonyx*, as a species, was introduced into earth’s ecosystem more than once.”

“You’re saying the two species aren’t the same?” Gabby asked.

“Dr. Holland,” Anna said. “Would you mind uploading the genetic results for me?”

“Of course.” Which he did, still waiting for Jack to explain.

“I’m saying that each time one of those things trashes the planet, it’s carrying the same genetic cargo, tweaked slightly here and there to accommodate shifting conditions.”

“Then would the same not be true of *Plesiadapiformes*?” Grant said.

Jack rubbed his hands together, chasing away the numbness creeping into the tips of his fingers. “It would. Look, I’ll be the first to

admit it's a hard concept for our delicate human egos to accept. On some level, human beings take for granted that all other species ever to have graced the planet were merely the opening act to us, the main attraction. No doubt, the species who lived here probably believed they too were special."

"Dr. Greer, I've completed an initial comparison between the *Mesonyx* genome taken from the Atean ship and the one extracted from the bone sample."

"How close are they?" Grant asked.

"Close enough to show a common ancestry, as you have already indicated. However, with one noticeable difference. The inhabitants of this city appear to have had Salzburg syndrome, while the specimen from the ship shows no signs of the disorder."

"Are both the 47th and 48th chromatids present in the leg bone Grant analyzed?" Jack asked.

"I'm afraid not. The 47th alone is present, though it contains all four of the disorder's known genes."

"What do you think that means?" Grant asked.

Gabby frowned. "It means genetically speaking, they were facing the exact same biological and planetary threats we are today."

"And we know how the planetary threat part ended for them," Grant said, trying not to sound glib.

"I'm afraid there is more," Anna said. "I was able to utilize the prime number solution to decipher the version of Salzburg detected in the bone specimen." Without needing to be told, Anna patched the image into each of their glasses.

At a quick glance, the pixelated image looked very much like the same pulsar map and entity representation they'd decoded from the 47th chromatid found in humans. Jack asked her for a detailed comparison.

"I am afraid the pulsar map shows a different planetary system," she replied. "Working backwards, I have calculated the star's location to be one thousand light years from Earth. Furthermore, given the galaxy's rate of motion and the changing pulse frequency of the celestial bodies in question, this map was created approximately two hundred and fifty million years ago."

"That date lines up with the Permian extinction," Jack said, excitedly. "Which means another one of those ships struck the earth two hundred and fifty million years ago, wiping out life and releasing a set roster of species into the ecosystem. Each of them then fought

and struggled for survival, but only one rose to dominate the planet.”

“The descendants of the *Mesonyx*,” Grant said.

“Exactly. Then sixty-five million years ago, another ship crashed into the planet, killing most life on Earth, including this thriving civilization of dolphin people, only to lead to the emergence of humans.”

“The cycle repeating itself,” Gabby said, “over and over.”

“That implies it is now our turn to go extinct,” Anna indicated.

Gabby shook her head in disbelief. “It’s as though they keep running back the clock and letting evolution play out over and over again. On more than one occasion in our own history, humans were on the brink of extinction. Run the tapes a thousand times and in each one a completely different scenario might play out. But why?”

“Maybe they’re looking for something and aren’t finding it,” Jack proposed.

Grant straightened his back. “So much for evolutionary destiny.”

“I believe there is a complicating factor you have not addressed yet,” Anna interjected. “Either the Ateans have spread throughout the Milky Way galaxy, or each of the extinctions has been caused by a different extraterrestrial species.”

“That is a complication,” Jack said, staring down at the cracked femur lying on the floor. “Any thoughts on the matter, Anna?”

“Unfortunately, at this time there is not sufficient data to draw any firm conclusions.”

“Wherever they’re coming from,” Jack said, “one very important question remains. Why does it keep happening?”

Just then the sound of gunfire echoed down the stone hallway.

Jack hailed Mullins and the others on the radio, but all he got back was static.

Chapter 51

Rome

Mia spent most of the trip back to the Saint Andrea Hospital trying to wrap her brain around what they'd just seen. "Do you think it was some kind of trick?" she asked, hating the idea of being fooled, while doing her best to stay open to anything, no matter how outlandish it might at first seem.

Ollie glanced at her rapidly before returning to the road. "I don't see how. I suppose they could have had microphones in the rooms and earpieces plugged into each girl's ears, but what would be the point of that? Just to waste our time? If that were the case, it would mean that Dr. Putelli, Felli, the two girls and the graduate students evaluating them were all in on it. That to me sounds a lot more farfetched."

"We need to get those girls back to the research hospital as soon as possible and run a whole battery of tests," Mia said, rubbing her hands on her cargo pants. "Dr. Putelli worried the girls had gone insane, but maybe there's a scientific explanation for what's happening."

"A scientific explanation for telepathy?" Ollie replied. "Because that's what it was. Barring the possibility the two of us just got punked, you're talking about genetic changes that have allowed two people to communicate with their minds." He slapped the wheel several times. "I just don't believe it."

"I don't either," she said, cracking the knuckles on both of her hands. "But I can't explain what we witnessed. Which is precisely why we need additional tests. To ensure what we saw was real and not a product of magical thinking. Back when they discovered the Atean ship, Jack told me several of the scientists on the rig had already closed their minds to the possibility it was of extraterrestrial origin even before reviewing the evidence. That's where we've come to in our society. Everyone's so scared of looking foolish, we've stopped pushing the boundaries. Cynicism masquerading as skepticism, stifling the emergence of new theories simply because they don't conform to our current understanding. That's not to say the scientific method isn't working as it should, because it is, but science requires investigation to occur before conclusions are formed, not the other way around."

"And what if the final stage of Salzburg syndrome has somehow opened up a form of communication humans have never known before?"

Mia was not sure she agreed with Ollie's premise, but she went along anyway. "I'm not sure how new this is. If you look at the rest of

the Salzburg chromosome, many of the genes do little more than accentuate existing abilities. Some of us live longer than others. Some of us have denser bones. Some of us are born with genes which seem to be harming us. The spread is relatively even and often random. The same might be true for telepathy. Since at least the mid-twentieth century, scientists have attempted to prove that it was at least possible. From 1978 until 1995, the CIA had a program called Stargate where they utilized subjects with so-called extra-sensory perception to spy on the Russians. I'm saying, what if our evidence was weak because our telepathic abilities themselves weren't very well developed or understood? The circumstantial evidence is there. How many times have you dialed someone important in your life, only to find they were trying to call you at the very same time? What if all HOK3 did was to strengthen something that's already within us? If we're right, then it means those girls and anyone else like them may represent a new stage of human evolution."

He shot her a sideways glance. "I know that look," Ollie said with alarm. "You wanna take those girls to Greenland, don't you? Well, forget it. There's a war going on."

"I've already sequenced their DNA," she argued, holding out the thumb drive she kept with her at all times. "I'm not the type to go on a hunch, but something is telling me that's where they might be needed."

"Needed or not, you're giving me a headache," Ollie snapped, flipping on the radio to the international news station.

"In Nevada, what started as an act of defiance has turned into full-blown sedition after a group of cattle farmers, supported by local militia groups, declared their own independent government. With the bulk of the country's military and police forces struggling to maintain order in increasingly lawless urban centers, state and federal authorities simply lack the manpower to end a bloody standoff that has so far claimed over a hundred and fifty lives.

"In other news, a medical examiner in Richmond has determined the remains found in the trunk of a burned-out Cadillac are not those of famed geneticist Alan Salzburg, but his assistant Dr. Gregory Abbott."

Mia went to turn it up, but the news had already switched to President Myers and his new commitment to utilize the full force of the country's nuclear arsenal to keep the planet safe.

"What does that mean?" Ollie asked.

Before Mia could gather her thoughts enough to form a coherent reply, they pulled into the hospital parking lot only to find the place

swarming with the pulsing blue lights of Carabinieri police cars. Ollie slammed on the brakes.

“Do you think there was an attack?” Mia asked. She might not have said the word Sentinel, but it was clearly on the tips of their tongues.

“Not worth taking a chance,” Ollie replied, throwing the car into reverse and pulling backwards. From out of nowhere, two police cars swept in from both sides, blocking their escape. Then two more did the same from the front. With weapons drawn, officers approached the driver and passenger side windows, waving at Mia and Ollie to cut the engine and exit the vehicle. With no hope of escape, they did as they were told and were promptly taken into custody.

•••

Mia found herself waiting alone in a small windowless room in an Italian police station for what felt like hours, sipping on a sickeningly good cup of Illy coffee. The handcuffs had been loosened slightly after they sat her down, but that didn’t make them comfortable to wear, especially since they were laced through a ring on the desk. She and Ollie had each been booked and placed in separate interrogation rooms. A single camera peered down at her from the corner of the room. But the space she was in lacked more than just visual warmth. The air conditioning was sending waves of frigid air charging up her arms. She couldn’t help wonder what all this was about. As she waited, dozens of scenarios played out in her mind. Either way, she felt innocent of any wrongdoing since she and Ollie had been on the other side of town and had missed whatever had gone down at the hospital.

The door opened and a man sauntered in. Late fifties. Silver hair with black streaks. Small upturned nose and smooth skin. This guy spent a lot of time taking care of himself and wanted others to know it. He slid into the seat opposite Mia and extended his hand.

“Commissario Vicario,” he said, in the kind of suave manner that might have been appealing if she weren’t wearing handcuffs.

His hands were soft and perfumed with lavender.

“You’re probably asking yourself why you’re here.”

“You took the words right out of my mouth.”

Vicario smiled, flashing a set of perfect teeth. “I regret to inform you that Dr. Putelli is dead.”

“Dead?” Mia repeated, the words hardly making sense.

“Murdered.”

Mia's back pressed against the back of her chair, her very being filled at once with shock, surprise and anguish. "Oh, no, when did it happen?"

"That's what we were hoping you could help us with. We couldn't help but notice you and your friend were driving Dr. Putelli's car."

"He loaned it to us," Mia said, distinctly aware how lame that sounded, even if it was the truth.

Vicario nodded. "Of course he did. Italian men in Rome are known to share a meal and sometimes clothing with good friends. But there are two things they never share. The first is their women and the second is their cars. So do you wish to amend your answer?"

Mia's eyes hardened. "I told you what happened."

"Perhaps you would care to watch the footage from the hospital's security system." Vicario snapped his fingers and a muscular man in a tight suit brought in a tablet, set it before Mia and clicked play.

A black and white video showed a pair who looked very much like Mia and Ollie ambush Dr. Putelli near the seventh-floor elevators. They stabbed him repeatedly, leaving him lying on the floor in a growing pool of blood. Then one of them reached into the pocket of his lab coat before fleeing down the stairwell.

"Was that when you stole his keys, Dr. Ward?"

"Why on earth would we want to steal Dr. Putelli's car? I didn't even know what he had."

"Perhaps the car was only a trophy," Vicario suggested. "Perhaps the two of you had professional differences. Was there any tension between you?"

"If scientists aren't disagreeing, then they aren't doing their job."

"A note on Dr. Putelli's desk mentioned he was going to confront you about an issue he had. Did that ever happen?"

Mia suddenly felt as though the room might not be so cold after all. In fact, it was starting to feel downright hot.

"You're sweating," Vicario said, offering her a handkerchief. "Is it too warm in here? I can have them turn up the air conditioning."

"I'm fine. Dr. Putelli and I talked and worked it out. He wasn't used to a woman taking charge. I think it made him feel uncomfortable."

"You thought of him as a misogynist. Was that it?"

"I thought of him as a fellow scientist with a blind spot to anything out of his immediate experience."

“Whose idea was it to kill Dr. Putelli?” Vicario asked with brutal frankness.

“I’m done with this,” Mia said, crossing her arms, or at least trying to given her hands were bolted to the table. “Get me a lawyer.”

Vicario placed his soft hands on the table and stood up. “As you wish.” And with that he left the room. He hadn’t been gone more than five minutes before the door opened again. Mia knew there was no chance a lawyer or anyone else sent to help her had arrived this quickly. But when she saw his face, Mia was frozen in disbelief.

“Alan?”

Alan Salzburg strolled in with all the confidence of a king entering his throne room. Even at a respectable six foot one, his lithe form and narrow shoulders made him seem so much taller. His hair was thinning a little on top, and in the years since she’d last seen him, it had started to turn grey. The years had also dug heavy grooves across his forehead and along the corners of his mouth. A loose mound of skin hung beneath his chin, which jiggled slightly whenever he spoke. Alan sat down and removed his glasses.

“It’s been a long time, kiddo.” The smile on his face showed genuine affection.

“I don’t understand,” Mia said. “I thought you were dead.”

Alan stared up at the camera and curled his fist into a ball. “This is a private conversation,” he told her. “No sense inviting anyone else. There’s so much to tell you, but this is certainly not the time or the place for that. I’ve been following your work with great care since you left, Mia. And I know now that I was right in choosing you.”

Mia stared at him, a growing storm cloud of dread gathering within her.

He raised one finger and tisked. “You and Ollie are in deep, deep trouble. Taking another man’s life. Around here that’s at least twenty years. And with what we’re facing these days, it’ll be a miracle if you ever get to see your daughter again. But, as always, Mia, you do have your fans. In fact, I was just speaking to one of them in Washington, D.C. A reporter for the *Post*. She knew all about the work you and Dr. Greer have been doing. A feisty little number named Kay Mahoro. I think you’d like her.”

“You set us up, didn’t you?” Mia shouted, the reality slowly dawning on her. “Don’t you realize the importance of what we’re doing here?”

“Probably more than anyone else on the planet. But here’s the good news. The State Department has already agreed to secure your

release. All it took was a phone call from my personal friend President Myers. You'll be coming with me now. And I hope you packed warm clothes, because you'll need them where we're going."

"And the bad news?"

Alan's face squished up as though he had eaten something tart. "I'm afraid Ollie won't be joining us."

Understanding flashed across Mia's face. "Don't you dare hurt him," she screamed, springing out of her seat, stopped short by the cuffs chaining her to the table.

"Please don't fret, kiddo," Alan reassured her. "He won't feel a thing."

Chapter 52

Greenland

“Anna, have you been able to reach Northern Star yet?” Jack asked, adrenaline coursing through him.

She shook her head. “I am afraid not, Dr. Greer. We are likely too deep underground at this point to establish a clear line of communication.”

“Jack, even if the U.S. military has regained control, there’s no way they’ll get here in time anyway,” Grant said as he hurried to pack up the equipment and instrumentation.

The sound of gunfire continued to ring out in sporadic bursts.

“Let’s go,” Jack said, throwing his helmet back on. “Anna, you stay here. If none of us make it back, head for the elevator. At least that way what we’ve learned won’t be lost.”

The three of them charged out of the small stone room, leaving Anna behind.

The sounds of fighting grew louder as they entered an enormous chamber. The ceiling sat a hundred feet above them. It appeared to be some sort of supply storage area. The remains of rusted vehicles and pallets of food formed tiny mounds of debris scattered everywhere. Figures here and there popped up from behind the cover, firing short bursts only to disappear again. To their left, Jack saw that Mullins and the rest of the science team were pinned down. Dag rose up to return fire, only to be forced down right away by incoming rounds. Beyond the Israeli forces was an archway and a set of stairs. Could that be what the soldiers were protecting, a direct route to the pyramid and the source of the blast wave?

Without taking aim, Rajesh held his pistol over the debris pile and fired until his magazine ran empty.

Jack, Gabby and Grant ducked down behind a mound of bones and watched as three enemies began circling to the right of Mullin’s position.

“Mullins, do you read me?” Jack shouted into his mic.

“About time you showed up.”

“Listen, you’ve got two enemies moving across your flank.”

“Got ‘em,” Mullins said, swinging out and laying down fire on them.

“Jack,” Grant hollered, holding one of the bones he’d wrenched from the pile. “Do these look like cut marks to you?”

“Are you for real?” Jack started to say as bullets pinged off the wall above them. Grant stood stunned for a moment until another round knocked the radius bone right out of his outstretched hand. He dropped to the floor, counting his fingers to make sure all were accounted for.

“I’m not sure we can win this battle,” Gabby said.

“We could if it was a math-off,” Dag shouted over the din of fire.

These guys were determined to keep the group from making it past this open chamber. What Mullins didn’t realize was that the outcropping of stone fifteen feet above his position was actually a walkway which led to the other side of the chamber. With his eyes, Jack followed the walkway from right to left, watching how it tapered into a set of stone stairs about thirty feet behind where Mullins and the others were pinned down. That was where Jack saw another tunnel opening, similar to the one they’d travelled through to get here. He also remembered how shortly after entering the bunker system, the path had split and they had decided to keep to the right. If Jack could backtrack and circle around, he might be able to climb up to the catwalk and cross over and behind the enemy before they knew what hit them.

“Dag, Eugene, lay down some covering fire. I’ve got a plan.”

A second later they did so and Jack took off running up the narrow hallway. Moments later he passed the room where Anna was waiting.

“Dr. Greer,” she said, beginning to follow.

“Not now, Anna.”

The sound of Jack’s labored breathing echoed inside his helmet as he reached the fork and proceeded down the other way. He then switched his vision to thermal, trying to avoid catching a stray bullet as he raced down the corridor. Up ahead, he spotted Mullins and the others coming under renewed assault. To his right, Gabby and Grant remained behind the bone pile, popping out here and there to fire back at the enemy.

“Okay,” Jack said, “give me another burst of covering fire.”

They obliged and Jack sprinted to his left for the stone steps and the narrow ledge. It was a risky move since if they spotted him, he was an easy target. He had nearly reached the top when he heard Grant moan with pain and slump over. Jack froze. Gabby spun and immediately began searching for a wound. A soldier on the far right was inching toward them, leapfrogging from pile to pile.

"Gabby, leave Grant for now," he told her. "You got someone coming up on you."

His heart pounding, Jack had to decide whether to risk Gabby's life or his own by firing from his elevated position.

That was when he saw Anna, entering the open space from the corridor.

"Anna, I told you to stay put," he called out over the radio. "Are you crazy?"

Without saying a word, she reached Grant, closed her metallic hands around his wrists and began dragging him back to safety.

Just then the soldier nearest them reached the bone pile, peered over and fired. He must not have noticed Gabby directly below him, because he was aiming straight at Grant and Anna. The first round tore through Grant's wrist, spraying blood on the ground. The next narrowly missed his head and struck Anna in the leg, causing it to explode in a fit of sparks. She fell over, landing with a loud metallic crunch. She reached out with one hand, as if to tell him to stop, and that was when the third shot took it off at the wrist. Hydraulic fluid poured out onto the icy ground, sending up rivulets of steam.

Rajesh sprang up at once, snatching Dag's rifle, and filled the soldier with a dozen rounds. His body fell back over the bone pile, dead. Jack continued crawling forward, determined to work his way behind them, when he heard fire directly below him. Rajesh took two bullets to the chest. As Anna watched him fall, her one remaining hand curled into a fist.

But it wasn't one of the Israeli soldiers who had shot him. It was Tamura. And she turned on Mullins now, shooting him in the legs and torso.

With fifty percent of them down, Eugene threw up his rifle and raised his arms in surrender. One by one, five Israeli Special Forces stood up, keying on the few remaining holdouts. Tamura stood too, waving the pistol Mullins must have given her when the firefight broke out.

"Throw down your weapons," Tamura ordered them.

Gabby was the next to stand and drop her weapon, followed by Dag, who rushed to Rajesh's side. Watching all this, Jack continued along the catwalk, making slow progress. With Jack pressed up against the chamber's left wall, only someone standing near Grant had a chance of spotting him.

"Dr. Viswanathan," Anna called out. "Are you badly hurt?" She began dragging herself over with her remaining limbs.

"Why did you do this?" Dag asked, cradling Rajesh, who was coughing up blood.

"You should be asking Jack that question," Tamura said, looking around. "Speaking of Jack, where did he run off to? Commander Avraham, I heard him say he had a plan right before he disappeared."

Avraham moved in. He was chiseled with a dark complexion and a black bushy beard. "All right, round them up. We'll find the last one sooner or later."

Jack was three-quarters of the way across when he felt pressure begin to build in his ears. Then came the humming. Soon the air filled with an electric current as the soldiers on the lower level looked around fearfully.

"We need to get out of here," Avraham began to say, but never got the words out before the soldier's weapons were yanked from their hands and to the ground by an irresistible magnetic force. Jack struggled to move his own rifle, but it wouldn't budge. Then the flashbulb of light he knew was coming tore at his retinas. The rumbling sound grew louder, followed by a thunderous crash that filled the chamber as the ceiling folded in on itself in a blizzard of ice and destruction. But this was no storm, it was a massive boulder of ancient compacted snow falling in on them. Projectiles of ice and stone rained down on soldiers and scientists alike. Three Israeli Special Forces who were just then crossing the middle of the chamber disappeared in a white haze.

When the magnetic force finally released, Jack sprang to his feet. Above him, an enormous hole had punched through the ceiling, revealing the outside world—or at least what passed for outside down here. Below, the storage floor was nearly unrecognizable. A new mountain had risen up from the center of the room. Beneath it, a handful of the enemy lay dead, others scattered about dying. Gabby was attempting to help Grant while Anna continued pulling herself toward Rajesh. The others, including Tamura, were nowhere to be seen.

Crossing to the back of the room, Jack took the stone steps two at a time. He began making his way toward his friends, watchful for any enemies that might have survived. He was circling around the right-hand side of the new mound, calling out people's names, when he heard Tamura say, "I don't see what all the fuss is about." She stood over Anna, kicking her. Jack leveled his weapon and readied to shoot when something knocked the wind out of him and sent him tumbling to the ground. His rifle slid a few yards away. He rushed to grab it, but he wasn't quick enough.

"Nice little disappearing act," Commander Avraham said, pulling Jack to his feet and tearing off his helmet. He caught sight of Anna, now a multiple amputee. The sight of so many of his friends either dead or seriously wounded tore at him. They had failed. They would never reach the pyramid and everything they had learned about the *Mesonyx* people would die with them.

If all of that was true, then why was Anna winking at him?

Avraham shoved Jack forward. "We'll take the robot and kill the rest." He tapped something on his wrist and a strange-looking animal came galloping toward them.

It took Jack a moment to realize it was a robotic pack animal. The metallic creature was all torso with four back-jointed legs pumping furiously over the rough terrain. It certainly explained the strange tracks they had found earlier.

Jack's gaze soon found Tamura. "You never were a member of the military, were you?"

"I am so," she replied coldly. "Just not yours. After we swept in and killed your advance team, my primary role was to stay behind and gather as much intelligence as I could. My other role was to keep any of you from getting too close to the objective."

"Is that why you killed the wounded man in the tunnel?" Jack asked. "So he'd stop talking?"

Avraham turned to her. "That was you who shot Dahan?"

"Sure," Jack answered for her. "And he wasn't the only one. She also killed the other guy you left in the facility, probably so we would trust her."

The distant sound of a buzzsaw caught Jack's attention. No, not a buzzsaw, more like a swarm of bees and they were heading their way. Tamura and Avraham caught the sound too because they each looked around fearfully.

The noise grew louder until a dozen black objects dropped down through the hole in the ceiling and dove on their position. They broke up into two even groups, one half going for Tamura, the other for Avraham.

They were the drones Anna had put together in the electronics lab before heading down.

Tamura swatted at them before raising her pistol to take a shot. One of the drones flew from behind and crashed into the weapon, knocking it from her grasp. The drone tumbled end over end, only to catch itself and zip away before hitting the ground. Another made a

sharp turn and jammed its spinning rotors right into her face. Tamura shrieked and clutched at her bleeding eyes.

Jack sank an ice cleat into the top of Avraham's boot at the same time that he buried his elbow deep into the commander's gut, bending him at the waist. He then rolled over, grabbed the man's fallen rifle and popped up, riddling his body with as many holes as he could.

Now all the drones were on Tamura. Blinded, she pawed at the ground in a frantic attempt to retrieve her weapon. But Jack was there first, crushing her outstretched fingers with the heel of his boot.

Tamura squealed in pain, terror plastered over her now pallid and bloody face. He set the barrel to her head and moved his finger over the trigger.

"Dr. Greer, please do not kill her," Anna begged.

"Why the hell not?"

"I venture to guess continuing to exist with what she has done will be far more painful."

Jack flipped the gun around and brought it down against her skull, knocking her out instead.

Gabby came over and rushed past him to Dag and Eugene, who had punched their way out of the packed snow. They had kept their helmets on, which meant they could still breathe under all that snow. Working together, they began searching for the others. It soon became an all-hands affair as, one by one, they managed to pull them free.

"How's Grant?" Jack asked Gabby.

"He's alive," she said. "For now."

But the same couldn't be said for Rajesh. The bullets that had struck him in the chest had killed him in a matter of minutes. Captain Mullins was also alive, but barely.

The sound of Russian voices echoing from inside the tunnel froze the blood in Jack's veins. How could it be that after everything they had sacrificed, and struggled to overcome, they would be taken out by a fresh group of enemy soldiers?

Jack, and the few who could, raised their weapons, prepared to fight. Gunfire echoed down the corridor toward them. Jack tensed, dropping behind cover. A moment later figures moved into the chamber and Jack had to ask himself if he was dreaming.

"Friendlies," Admiral Stark shouted. "Do not fire. I repeat, do not fire."

He was flanked by a squad of SEAL Team operators. From the

other corridor came members of Delta Force.

Jack collapsed into the mound of ice beneath his feet.

At last Anna reached Rajesh and continued to stroke his hair with her one remaining hand until they took him away.

Chapter 53

Greenland

With Northern Star back in friendly hands and the enemy forces either dead or captured, the next phase could begin. Namely, putting to rest Rajesh and the others who had fallen and mourning those who had given their lives. Mullins was in intensive care and being prepped for a medevac back to the United States. Grant's initial prognosis had been the same, but had changed dramatically over the course of a few hours. It seemed his wounds were healing faster than any of the doctors could believe, and something inside of Jack suspected that if Mia was here, she might understand why.

Tamura, as it turned out, was not Israeli Special Forces, but an agent working on their behalf. Born and bred in America, she had been telling Jack the truth about her family's imprisonment in the camps during the war. Despite the government's attempts to reconcile, she had lived with that burning desire for revenge her entire life. Blinded and disfigured, she would be returned to the U.S. where she was expected to be tried as a spy, a crime for which she would certainly face the death penalty.

As for Anna, she had been reduced to a third-rate pair of treads and a single arm until the necessary parts were flown in, along with the two grad students, Adam and Leah, who were all that remained of her maintenance team. It was sad and downright disheartening that Rajesh would never get a chance to see the rest of Anna's incredible journey to adulthood and beyond. Jack hoped it would be a long one, but given the present situation, anything longer than a week or two would be nice.

She had stayed by his icy grave on the surface until her hydraulic fluid had begun to congeal with the cold. That kind of devotion had left the rest of the military personnel on site feeling mystified and somewhat disturbed. But not anyone who knew her. In more ways than one, Rajesh had been a father to her. And whether she knew it or not, Anna was now an orphan.

Walking the now-bustling corridors of Northern Star, Jack couldn't help but reflect on the astounding discoveries they had made beneath Greenland's ice sheet. For reasons they had yet to understand, the once-flourishing *Mesonyx* civilization had been marked for extinction, a frightening fate now shared by humans today. His mind turned to one of the statues they had found in the temple, the simian creature with the chain around its neck. Genetically, it was a distant cousin

and yet after millions of years it had remained but an animal. Evolution, it seemed, didn't choose favorites. This time around, perhaps by a series of accidents or blind luck, *Homo sapiens* were the ones to scale the perilous slope and claim a spot at the top of the animal kingdom. But the most important questions remained unanswered. Were we worthy of the honor? And could we succeed in holding on where so many species before had failed?

•••

Soon enough, the time came to descend once again. Other teams had swept over the underground city extensively, only to discover that Jack had at least been right about one thing. The storage area did lead up to the pyramid. Centered inside the pyramid's main chamber sat what appeared to be a twenty-foot-tall ornate marble shrine. Like the Edicule that covered the purported tomb of Jesus in Jerusalem, or the Kaaba in Mecca, the beautifully carved rectangular structure radiated with energy. Unlike those other mystical places, however, the power here could actually be measured. The readings off the magnetometer revealed incredibly powerful electromagnetic currents flowing all around the structure.

All who could be were present when engineers began prying apart the structure, looking for a way to get at whatever was inside. A winch and pulley helped to remove the roof. Then the walls came down. For Jack, seeing a structure that ancient turned to rubble broke his heart. But what they saw inside left them in awe.

"What is that thing?" Dag asked.

A circular distortion nearly twenty feet across hovered before them. It shimmered in the dim pools of light, rotating in a slow clockwise circle. As they stared into the swirling pattern, it was almost possible to see strangely shaped figures gathered on the other side.

For a moment, Jack could swear one of those shapes resembled his deceased mother. He rubbed his eyes for what felt like a long time. When he was done, he could hear Mia beside him, calling out her daughter's name.

Everyone gathered was in tears, their faces masks of tortured ecstasy.

A surge of longing and nostalgia closed around him like a tight fist. Jack fought free from its intoxicating grasp. He understood now why the ancient people who had lived here had worshiped this spot. To them it had been a doorway to the afterlife. But then an old saying came racing through the cluttered neural pathways in his mind.

Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.

A famous science fiction writer had once coined the phrase, and it had never been truer than it was at this very moment. They weren't witnessing some metaphysical gateway to the spirit world, they were staring into another kind of doorway altogether.

"It appears to be a portal," Anna observed.

Gabby swallowed. "But to where?" she wondered, brushing the salty tears from her eyes.

"Difficult to say for sure," Jack replied dreamily, his fingers rubbing against one another in slow, thoughtful circles. "But I can hardly wait to find out."

Real life versus fiction

While *Extinction Countdown* is a work of fiction, several of the elements that went into building the story were drawn directly from newspaper headlines and magazine articles as well as from medical and scientific journals. Here are just a few.

Pulsar Map:

When the Voyager space probes were launched in 1977, each included a golden phonograph record intended as a greeting to any extraterrestrial intelligence who happened upon them. The golden case protecting them was inscribed with binary instructions on how to play the record as well as a pulsar map indicating Earth's location. Pulsars are the rapidly rotating remnants of exploded stars, each and every one emitting a unique pattern of pulses. They are also among the most consistent known objects in the universe, lasting millions and often billions of years. The map identified fourteen nearby pulsars, showing their relative distance from Earth. An alien species who was capable of understanding the message would only need to locate three of the fourteen pulsars mentioned in order to triangulate Earth's position in this part of our galactic neighborhood.

Biophotons:

Although they sound utterly fantastical, biophotons are real and consist of photons in the ultraviolet and low visible light range that are produced by biological systems. First discovered by Soviet scientist Alexander Gurwitsch in the 1920s, the low-level biophotonic light is considerably weaker, for example, than that observed during displays of bioluminescence. Recent hypotheses suggest this may represent one of the ways in which cells communicate with one another. However, further testing is required.

GPS location in images:

What many of us don't realize is that every time your smartphone (and in some cases cameras) snaps a picture, that beautiful vista isn't the only thing being captured. In many cases, several metadata fields are also recorded. Some of these fields include the time the image was

taken, the model, camera settings and, more importantly, the GPS location. In some cases, this has helped the police apprehend a criminal, although at other times, it has been used by stalkers and other bad actors.

GMOs:

One thing I want to make clear. *Extinction Countdown* is neither pro- nor anti-GMO. In the book, the idea of genetically modified organisms was merely used as a technological benchmark for the appearance of Salzburg into the general gene pool. Developed in the 1980s and offered commercially in the 90s, GMOs have garnered a lot of bad press, some of it deserved, much of it not. The process of creating GMOs is commonly mistaken for being no different than what farmers and breeders have done for millennia. Breeding and farming, however, use artificial selection, choosing traits by breeding or cross-breeding, while GMOs can make specific changes to individual genes that are not known to occur in nature.

Wow! Signal:

In the summer of 1977, Ohio State University's Big Ear radio telescope detected what it believed was a signal of extraterrestrial origin. The strong narrowband radio signal appeared to be coming from the constellation Sagittarius. While reviewing the data days later, astronomer Jerry R. Ehman thought enough of the signal that he circled it in red ink and wrote "Wow!" along the margin. Since then, several "more scientifically accepted" theories have been proposed to explain the emission—ranging from satellites to passing comets. Despite repeated efforts, the signal was never detected again and remains a mystery.

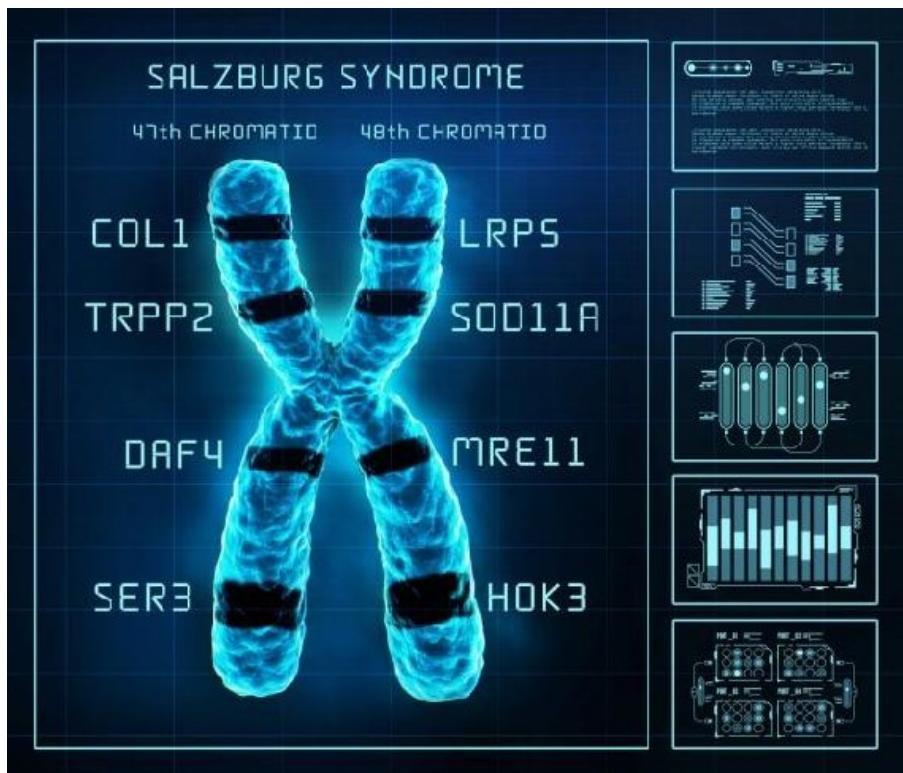
Drone Swarms:

Artificial Intelligence has opened the door to connecting small, relatively dumb computer brains into a technological hive mind. Recent demonstrations on *60 Minutes* and elsewhere have showcased the awesome, and in many cases frightening, potential of this new technology. As of now, the majority of the applications for drone swarms seem to be military-based. But with drone deliveries on the horizon, it's inevitable that the skills perfected for combat will one day be used to deliver Christmas gifts and pizzas.

Japanese Internment:

This aspect of the book was loosely inspired by the story of Fred Korematsu, who, in May of 1942, defied Executive Order 9066 (directing the forced removal of “resident enemy aliens” from coastal areas) and was arrested and sent to an internment camp. He later fought a legal battle that went all the way to the Supreme Court, arguing that the internment of Japanese Americans violated their rights under the Constitution, in particular the Fourteenth Amendment (the equal protection of the laws) and the Fifth Amendment (due process). Surprisingly, he lost that battle. In 1988, however, President Reagan passed the Civil Liberties Act which offered an apology and financial compensation for those affected by Executive Order 9066.

Quick Reference



Genes in the 47th Chromatid

COL1 encodes a protein that attacks bone density, mirroring the effects of diseases such as osteoporosis.

TRPP2 specifies a protein that weakens the ability of DNA to repair damage from ultraviolet radiation, leading to albinism.

DAF4 mimics the genetic disease progeria, which causes a rapid whittling down of chromosome tips, greatly accelerating the aging process.

SER3 produces a protein that effectively shrinks the frontal and temporal lobes, sections of the brain which control abilities such as speech and reasoning.

Genes in the 48th Chromatid

LRP5 encodes a protein that greatly increases bone density.

SOD11A encodes a powerful protein *Dsup*, helpful in shielding us from radiation.

MRE11, a gene which repairs errors in our DNA.

HOK3: Effects unknown.

Glossary

Chromosome: A structure found within most cells which carries genetic information.

Chromatid: The single strand of a chromosome

Gene: A sequence of nucleotides located within a chromosome. Genes help to determine inherited traits.

Proteins: Produced by genes as a means of expressing its function in the body.

Gene Sequencing: Used to determining the order of adenine, guanine, cytosine, and thymine, in a strand of DNA.

Thank you for reading *Extinction Countdown* Book 2 in the Ancient Origins Series!

I really hope you enjoyed it!
As many of you already know, reviews on Amazon are one of the best ways to get the word out and are also greatly appreciated.

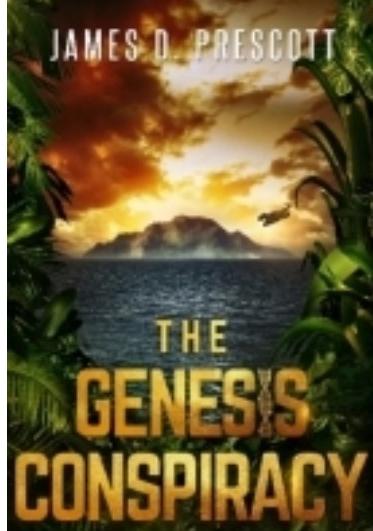
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